

NATALIE AND THE BREWSTERS



EMILY HOPKINS DRAKE

To Oldfield



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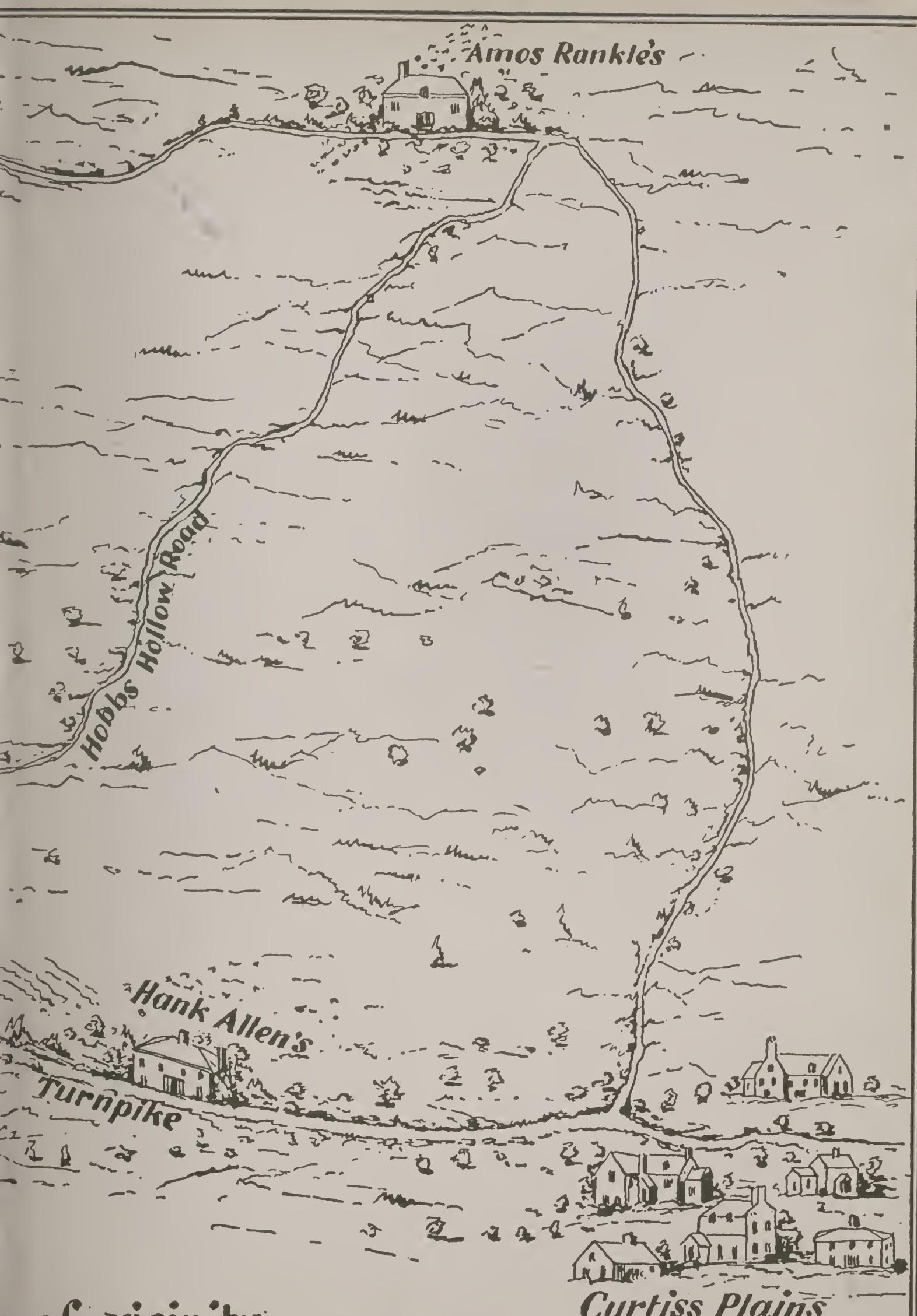
The Brewster

Station

Railroad

Armitage

Amos Rankle's



of vicinity

Curtiss Plains

NATALIE AND THE BREWSTERS



THERE WAS A LONG-DRAWN, ADMIRING "OH-H-H!"

—Page 35

NATALIE AND THE BREWSTERS

BY

EMILY HOPKINS DRAKE
"

ILLUSTRATED BY
F. J. BUTTERA ✓



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NATALIE AND THE BREWSTERS

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TO
MY SISTERS, JULIE AND RUTH,
IN LOVING APPRECIATION

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NATALIE AND THE BREWSTERS

PROLOGUE

THE road was rough and deep with dust. Ox-eyed daisies, giant thistles, and Queen Anne's lace, in rank profusion, grew in an uneven and, seemingly, unending border along its level, treeless length; and beyond these, on either side, stretched a riot of wild blackberry bushes and sumac. Uncared-for, little travelled, it lay like a dull gray ribbon across the gay carpet of the glowing countryside until, as if wearying of its own unlovely monotony, it vanished, presently, around a distant bend.

A July sun beat pitilessly down upon it, and upon a small figure trudging along in the center of its lengthening perspective; a figure strangely out of keeping with that solitary place, for it was a scrap of a girl in a pink linen frock,

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her chubby knees grimy with dust, her golden head bare of any covering. Yet she was not without companionship, for in her arms, an extraordinary, coy-looking doll was clasped as if it were the last link connecting her with the world whence she had come.

That it was a vastly different world was readily apparent. This was no country child. The daintiness of her clothing, together with the interest she displayed in the commonplace things about her, gave evidence of that. Even the doll, an imported creation of hand-painted felt, shared in the general impression, and seemed as out of place in that rural setting as an orchid in a field of buttercups.

You knew at a glance that these two had stepped from a world bounded by stone pavements and park walls; a world where little feet were warned to **KEEP OFF THE GRASS**, and little hands forbidden to pick flowers. No wonder this small person looked with amazement at the wealth of flowers on every side,—dusty, to be sure, and many of them past their freshest

blooming, but, nevertheless, desirable in her young eyes; at the tall wayside grasses swaying in the breeze, and at the green of distant, rolling hills. Surely, here one might find the unknown but longed-for joy of freedom; here one might find relief from that nagging voice forever saying, "Now, Miss Natalie, you know you aren't allowed to pick those flowers. See,—the policeman's watching you!" or, "Just look what you've done to your pretty dress! Wait till I tell your mamma what a naughty girl you've been!"

The small girl marched along with a certain air of importance and much flirting of short pink skirts, as one who would say "I'm my own boss now,—just watch me!" And from her business-like manner, it was obvious that she had a very definite goal; for she neither loitered nor turned aside, but ploughed steadily and rapidly on, kicking up a large cloud of dust as she went.

It was nice, she decided, to be out here alone,—she was not at all afraid; nice to be walking in this queer, dusty road instead of riding in the big, green car; nice to be rid of Dulcie and the

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red-haired man who had looked at her with such hard eyes and called her a "brat." She had been glad when Dulcie told him to stop the car and, lifting her down, had said, "There, now,— run along,—that's a good girl! There's a house just round that bend. See?—It's just a little way. And your mamma's there waiting for you." Then they had driven away and left her standing in the road.

It was only another of the many strange things that had happened within the last few days. Her world, it seemed, had gone all topsy-turvy. Into the midst of a rather boresome existence a cablegram had come; and this it was which had been the beginning of an extremely unpleasant chain of events.

First had come the hurried packing of trunks; and a white-faced, tearful little mother begging her, between good-bye kisses to "be a good girl and mind Dulcie." Then, with her departure, the red-haired man had come upon the scene; and on him, Natalie had laid the blame for all that happened later,—the lonesome days and



THE SMALL GIRL MARCHED ALONG WITH A CERTAIN AIR
OF IMPORTANCE.—*Page 13*

fearsome nights when Dulcie left her to herself, coming in at irregular hours to give her her meals and put her to bed; and the strange, hurried train trip, and then the ride in the big green car; and now this,—strangest of all these strange happenings—being set down on a country road, quite alone, and told that Mother was waiting “just round the bend.” It was all so queer and different, and hard for a four-year-old mind to understand.

But the bend in the road did not look so very far away, and she started toward it, happy in the thought of seeing Mother again so soon. But a very odd thing happened: the farther she walked, the farther away it seemed to be, almost as if it moved along a little with every step she took. It certainly was puzzling, and exasperating too!

At first she walked briskly, though the dust, ankle-deep in places, made every step more or less of an effort. But, presently, her feet began to drag, and she had to prod herself in order to make them go at all.

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To do this, she began to talk aloud in a quaint little way she had.

“Jus’ a little bit more,” she said; and because it sounded encouraging, she straightway said it again, “Jus’ a little bit more.” Then, almost before she knew it, she had made a rhyme:

“Jus’ a little bit more,
One—two—three—four.”

The rhythm of it helped a lot; it was easy to keep step to, and she soon discovered that she could go much faster when she said it.

“Jus’ a little bit more,
One—two—three—four.”

She could see a clump of blue flowers growing just where the road slipped out of sight around the bend. She thought it would be nice to pick some for her mother. A chipmunk scuttled across the road almost at her feet, and she paused to watch him wonderingly. The only squirrels she knew were big, fat, gray ones that waylaid you in the park and begged for peanuts. This one seemed to be afraid.

She started on again,—her journey almost over.

“Jus’ a little bit more,
One—two—three—four.”

The bend was close at hand now, and the flowers—

“Jus’ a *little* bit more—”

Now she had reached it!—But there was no house in sight, only the road stretching on and on,—deserted, interminable.

Natalie looked about her in bewilderment. Here was the bend to which Dulcie had pointed; but where, oh, where was the house? She stood perfectly still for a few minutes, peering about hopefully, as if half expecting to see it spring up out of the ground before her in a magical sort of way. Too young to realize the seriousness of her plight, her first feeling was one of disappointment. Soon, however, this gave place to fright, and she began to cry; not with quiet tears as is the way of some children, but

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with loud, hysterical sobbing which, as a vague suspicion that she had been tricked dawned upon her, gave way to ear-piercing shrieks of rage. She screamed, she roared, dancing up and down in a perfect frenzy. "Dulcie told a lie! Dulcie told a lie!"

Then, possibly, because there was no one to hear her; but, more probably, because her tears had, in some measure, cooled her wrath, she stopped as suddenly as she had begun, and set about drying her eyes. As no handkerchief was available, she wiped her face on her short pink skirt, and was properly concerned at sight of the resulting black smudges. She tried to clean them off, but it was no use; they were there to stay. So she gave it up as a bad job, and turned her attention elsewhere.

The effort, however, had served as a diversion, and the only remaining signs of her emotional outburst were an occasional sniffle and a tremulous catching of the breath.

She sat down by the roadside and began to play with the dust. It was soft and deep and

powdery, and as it trickled through her fingers, it reminded her of seashore sand, and was every bit as nice to dig in.

Thus half an hour passed. Then the sound of approaching wheels made her glance up with quick apprehension. A fat, black-and-white horse hitched to an old-fashioned, mud-spattered buggy came slowly around the bend. In the buggy, slouching forward with hands between his knees, sat a large old man. His round, good-natured face was framed in a tangle of gray hair which straggled down well over his coat collar. He wore no hat, and was chewing on a spear of timothy grass which dangled from one corner of his mouth down on his ragged, grizzly beard. In all her life, Natalie had never seen such an odd-looking person.

"Whoa, Nellie! Whoa there, girl!" he said, pulling on the slack reins and bringing the horse to a stop just opposite where the little girl was sitting. He looked kindly down at her.

"Want a ride, sissy?" he inquired.

Natalie shook her head.

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"Don't think I've seed you afore," he remarked tentatively, scratching his head with one pudgy hand. "Live round here?"

Natalie shook her head once more,—this time vigorously—and went on with her digging.

"Where *do ye* live?" he asked.

Natalie made no reply, though she would have liked to, for he seemed a friendly, harmless soul; but training was stronger than desire, and it had often been impressed upon her that she must not talk to strangers.

"Visitin' near here?" persisted the old man.

Still no answer.

"Guess you must ha' swallered your tongue," he chuckled, making ready to drive on.

Whereupon, just to prove to him that she *hadn't*, Natalie stuck it out as far as it would go.

This seemed to tickle the old man mightily. He shook all over with mirth.

"You're a sassy little witch," he said.

Then, clucking to his horse, and giving the reins a feeble shake, he started on; for there was a local ball game in the next town that

afternoon, and that, to Amos Runkle, was of infinitely greater importance than trying to solve the riddle of a strange child playing by the roadside, miles from any habitation.

A lump came into Natalie's throat as she sat there watching him drive off. She wished in a furtive, frightened little way that he would come back and talk to her some more, though she knew right well that, even if he did, she would never, never answer him. Her chin began to quiver, but she choked back her tears, for the old man was looking at her now, leaning far out over the wheel of his lop-sided buggy, still laughing. And as she watched, he stopped his horse, suddenly, as if he had forgotten something.

"Hi, sissy! Hi, sissy!" he called loudly.

Natalie stumbled to her feet and as she did so, he—yes, actually,—stuck out his tongue at her. Then with a great guffaw and slapping of reins, drove on.

Terrified at the thought of being left alone once more, Natalie ran after him down the road.

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"Wait, man, wait!" she called as loudly as she could.

But Amos, lost in ruminations of anticipated pleasure, did not hear.

Fireflies were dancing about in the dusk when Natalie, footsore and weary, came in sight of The Big House. Except for a few intervals when she had sat down to rest, she had kept moving steadily on all day, and was now so exhausted that the effort of walking had become a mere mechanical process. She had long since lost all interest in her surroundings, and looked about her with dull, indifferent eyes. Now, however, the sight of shelter close at hand roused her to some extent, and brought with it a vague sense of relief. For, aside from the fact that it would have been physically impossible for her to go much farther, distant growls of thunder warned of an approaching storm.

It was a plain, old-fashioned house whose wide porches and rambling wings spoke of com-

fort rather than beauty; a house which, by its very simplicity, seemed to radiate a quiet happiness. It was somewhat shabby and sadly in need of paint, but, for all that, possessed an air of liveableness as well as homely dignity, as if it felt that outward appearances meant little so long as it might shelter in its arms people who loved it well.

Lights shone in its lower windows, the gate swung wide as if in welcome, and through an avenue of trees a gravelled walk led up across a gently-sloping lawn, mysterious and shadowy in the gathering gloom.

To Natalie, toiling slowly up this lane, there came the sound of music and of laughter and of children's voices, singing. The words of the rollicking ditty came clearly through the open window:

"Once there lived a little man,
Where a little river ran,
And he had a little farm and little dairy O!
And he had a little plough,
And a little dappled cow,
Which he often called his pretty little fairy O!"

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A musical score for a single melody, likely for voice or piano. The music is in common time (indicated by '2' over '4') and uses a treble clef. The key signature has one flat, indicating F major or C minor. The melody consists of eight lines of music, each ending with a repeat sign and a double bar line, suggesting a verse-and-refrain structure. The lyrics describe a man's simple life with his little farm, plough, and cow.

Once there lived a lit - tle man, where a
lit - tle riv - er ran, And he had a
lit - tle farm and lit - tle dai - ry O.
And he had a lit - tle plough and a
lit - tle dap - pled cow Which he al - ways
used to call his lit - tle Fai - ry O.

She climbed the broad steps to the front door ;
but seeing no bell, and being too short to reach
the big brass knocker which gleamed half-way
up its white expanse, she pounded with all the

strength of her two small fists on its lower panels, crying imperiously, "Let me in!"

But the noise of the thunder, combined with the merriment inside, made her efforts inaudible.

What to do next, Natalie did not know. The storm was very close, now. Great jagged flashes of lightning lit up the yard with startling frequency; and then she could see a child's swing hanging from a branch of one of the tall trees, and an empty doll carriage overturned nearby. Afterward, darkness and the muffled roll of thunder made the night all the more terrifying.

"Once his little daughter Ann,
With a pretty little can,
Went a-milking when the morning sun was beaming O!"

sang the children.

"Boom! Boom! Boom!" went the thunder, rumbling away into an ominous silence.

Natalie began to cry in a quiet, ineffectual sort of way. She was far too spent for a noisy outburst, such as she had given voice to earlier in the day. But, gradually, as the song con-

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tinued, she found herself listening to the words, and soothed by the music, her crying ceased. And when, a little later, a friendly small dog came trotting up the steps and began to sniff her over, inquisitively, she found real comfort in its presence and stroked its smooth head gently until, with a sigh of contentment, it snuggled down beside her and went to sleep.

Then, suddenly, with the roar of swiftly down-pouring rain, the storm broke; and Natalie, too exhausted for further effort, cowered close to the doorway, a limp, scared heap.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING THE BREWSTER FAMILY

THE day had been an exciting one for the Brewster family. In the first place, it was Sally's seventh birthday, an event, in itself, quite worthy of distinction in this household where a birthday was considered every bit as important as Christmas. And in the second place, it had brought a new experience into their lives, an experience so delightful that they could never think of it in after years without a little thrill of ecstasy.

Sally had awakened that morning with a feeling of elation. For weeks there had been secrets in the air, whisperings and knowing looks, frequent excursions into town, mysterious packages whisked out of sight at her approach, shrieks of "Don't look!" if she entered a room suddenly

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and warnings to three-year-old Bobby not to tell things; all of which had served, not only to whet her curiosity, but also to gratify her small soul with a sense of her importance.

A pleasant warmth stole over her as she lay there, her glance flitting about the airy, chintz-hung room with its three other beds where her brother and sisters were still sleeping. It had come at last—the day for which they had worked and planned and waited,—*her* day!

Through the wide-flung casement windows, she could see the tossing green branches of the maples, and beyond these, as through a lacy screen, a sky all blue and gold, with clouds like huge beaten egg-whites floating slowly by. And she was happy, not because she was thinking of the surprises which she knew awaited her down-stairs, but because the day with its birds and sun and summer sweetness seemed to have been made that way expressly for her.

“Seven years old!” she chuckled to herself. “Next year I’ll be eight,—then *nine!* And I’ll be as old as Phyllis!”

That Phyllis moved ahead, too, in the matter of age, did not at once occur to her.

The grandfather's clock on the stair-landing boomed seven, and she sat up briskly, laughing, as the fancy struck her that it might well be announcing the years of her life instead of merely their rising time.

At her movement, Phyllis's big brown eyes flashed open, and she bounded out of bed, crying, "Hooray, everybody! Hooray! Hooray!—It's Sally's birthday! Hilda,—wake up, *quick!* Come on, let's pummel her!"

And with squeals of joy, the two little girls came racing across the room to fling themselves upon her with frantic embraces.

Such a noisy frolic then ensued, that Bobby was roused from his slumbers, and came scuttling backward over the side of his crib for all the world like a fat, clumsy little crab. Eager to join in the fun, but finding her small bare feet the only part of her available, at the moment, he was forced to content himself with tickling these.

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"Happy day! Happy day!" he babbled shrilly, hopping up and down on unsteady toes, as he circled round and round her.

Bobby was too young to have any very clear ideas in regard to birthdays. Once, he recalled, long, long, ago, he had had one himself. It stirred vague, pleasing memories of presents, of a cake ablaze with candles and of large helpings of caramel ice-cream. It also brought a remembrance of special dispensations in regard to bed-time and the taking of naps. And recollecting that Sally was the one about whom the interesting preparations of the past few weeks seemed to revolve, he decided that she was a person whose good will it would be well to cultivate. There was much of the diplomat in Bobby.

When the uproar had subsided a little, and he could make himself heard, he sidled up to her with an ingratiating smile.

"You're goin' to be awful s'prised," he said.
"you're goin'—"

"Sh-h-h!" Hilda's hand was over his mouth in

an instant. But he wriggled himself free, and, from a distance, glared defiance.

"I wasn't goin' to tell anysing," he sputtered wrathfully, filled with indignant protest at the implied mistrust. "You bad girl,—you!"

"Come now, let's not have any crossnesses on Sally's birthday."

It was Phyllis who spoke. Though younger than Hilda by two years, she was the ruling spirit of the little flock, and managed her brother and sisters with a firm hand.

"Let's hustle and see who'll get dressed first," she said. "The one who beats can help Bobby, 'cause he can't go as fast as the rest of us."

"I can, so!" Bobby spoke with firm conviction, starting in manfully on shoes and socks.

Whereupon the others followed suit, and, for a brief space, quiet reigned in the big room, save for their rapid, panting breaths, their scurrying footsteps and subdued giggles as, with stealthy, sidelong glances, they watched each other's progress.

Phyllis was ready first. So she turned her

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attention to poor bewildered Bobby who, with one arm through the wrong sleeve of his little blouse, was struggling vainly to locate the other armhole.

"Oh, Bobby!" she groaned, extricating him with more haste than gentleness, "you've got everything on inside-out and backside-to, and your shoes on the wrong feet. I'll have to undress you and start all over again!"

Bobby looked worried. "Will I be late?" he queried anxiously, giving himself into her hands with the meekness of defeat.

"No. We'll all wait and go down together," said Phyllis as she peeled off his little garments and deftly readjusted them. Though only nine, she was a capable child, quick and accurate in all she did, and apt to be a trifle intolerant of those less clever than herself.

"There!" she said at length, fastening the last button and regarding the result with approval. "Now, Mr. Robert Harrington Brewster, you're ready at last."

Bobby grinned.

"Don't we ever have to wash ourselves on birfdays?" he inquired in a surprised voice.

Phyllis looked at him blankly.

"Wash?" she echoed. "Oh, my goodness, gracious me!"

And leaning weakly against the wall, she burst into such uncontrollable laughter that the other two girls came running to find out what was the matter.

"What's the joke?" they demanded eagerly.

"We were in such a hurry, we—all—forgot—to—wash!" gurgled Phyllis.

Hilda and Sally joined in the shout; and Bobby, believing himself responsible for their hilarity, strutted up and down, remarking with a good deal of complacency, "Eve'ybody has to laugh at me,—I'm so funny."

"What's so funny, darlings?"

At the question they all turned, and there, in the doorway, stood Mother, smiling down at them.

"Oh, Mother, listen!"

They fluttered to her like so many gay little

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butterflies to a favorite flower; each trying to explain and excuse the omission; also trying to talk a little louder and a little faster than the other, and all laughing so uproariously that it was a wonder they could make themselves understood at all.

She listened to them, laughing indulgently; and when the clamor had somewhat subsided, said, "It's plain to see that you're *all* getting old and forgetful like poor old Aunty Baker, who puts on two dresses and then goes around looking for another."

She stooped to kiss their happy, upturned faces, giving Sally a special hug.

"Happy birthday, darling," she whispered.

Then gently disengaging herself from their embraces, she said briskly, "Come now,—Gussie has breakfast ready and waiting.—Into the bathroom, every one of you! And please, *please* try to remember what the soap and nail-brush are for! Come, Bobby,—I'll take you with me."

And with these admonitions, she left them.

Ten minutes was sufficient for ablutions on a day which promised to be filled with things of infinitely greater importance. Then they came racing downstairs to join their father, mother, and Bobby in the hall below, where the delicious odor of breakfast made them sniff the air and shout delightedly, “Hooray!—*Muffins!*”

At sight of their father, laughter broke out afresh for, in honor of the occasion, so he declared with all seriousness, he had donned a huge, fierce-looking, false mustache, its ends tied up with pink ribbons. They cast themselves upon him with noisy greetings; but he, escaping from their rough caresses, swung Sally up to his broad shoulder and fled ahead of them down the wide hall. At the dining-room door, however, he paused and set her down.

“Sally first, Sonny,” he said as Bobby tried to push past her into the room.

There was a long-drawn, admiring “Oh-h-h!” as the children filed slowly through the doorway, and beheld the flower-laden table and the pyramid of packages at Sally’s place.

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Bobby, in the foreground, eyed the stack expectantly.

"Anysing for me?" he asked with a speculative air.

"No, dear,—this is Sally's day," said Mother.
"Don't you remember?"

Bobby's "Ye-e-s," though prompt, was rather dubious. He was thinking how much nicer birthdays would be if every one could have a hand in opening the packages. His small fingers fairly itched to share in the interesting process.

But for a short time they all had to curb their curiosity; for it was an unwritten law in the Brewster household that no presents were to be opened until after the cereal had been eaten. So the children attacked their steaming dishes of oatmeal with alacrity, and very little talking ensued.

"I know *one* present that'll make her laugh,—don't you, Phyll?" remarked Hilda mysteriously, as she scraped up the last drop of cream in her saucer.

"I know two," answered Phyllis, smiling roguishly.

Bobby pounded the table with his teaspoon. "I know more'n anybody in the whole world," he announced grandly, not to be outdone by his elders.

"Modesty, thy name is Robert," said Father, his eyes twinkling.

"Don't be so smarty, Bobs," admonished Phyllis. "Stop talking, and eat your cereal."

Bobby banged the table with his spoon once more.

"I is *done!*!" he shouted. "See?" And held up his empty saucer in proof of his assertion.

Gussie, coming in just then with a fresh pitcher of cream, rescued the dish from his excited little hands.

"Bress his li'l pink heart," she murmured. For of all the Brewster children, Bobby held the warmest place in her affections.

"Which one you going to open first, Sally?" asked Phyllis.

Sally surveyed the assortment thoughtfully,

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and decided at once in favor of a large, oblong box, wrapped in silver paper and tied with a wide pink ribbon.

"That looks good to me," she said.

"That's Mother's," said Hilda.

"No fair telling," cautioned Mother.

Hilda's face crimsoned. "I'm sorry," she faltered.

"No harm, dear; only I thought it might be a little more fun if she didn't know."

Mother smiled reassuringly at the downcast face of her eldest; for Hilda was a sensitive child and felt the slightest rebuke keenly.

Then Gussie came in to remove the cereal dishes, and the fun began.

With fingers trembling with excitement, Sally untied the pink-ribboned package, while the children looked on, eager and expectant. As the last wrappings fell away, there was a chorus of exclamations.

"A new dress!" cried Sally, casting a triumphant look at Phyllis and remarking with considerable satisfaction, "Now I won't have to

wear your old made-over green one for best any more!"

And hopping down from her chair, she ran around the table to her mother, and throwing both arms about her neck, whispered, "Thank you."

"It's just like Carlotta's," she added after a more thorough inspection of it, "an' I *love* yellow."

Carlotta, being the only child of wealthy neighbors, was naturally looked upon by the simple little Brewsters as a pattern of all that was elegant.

Bobby, meanwhile, had slipped out of his high-chair, and, unobserved by the others, helped himself to one of the packages. It was a small, square box which rattled when he shook it; and he knew its contents well.

"Open zis one, sister," he begged, holding it out eagerly.

But Sally, gloating over treasures yet to come, ignored his outstretched hand.

"Oh, Bobby, I want to look at this one first,"

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she said a trifle petulantly, selecting a large box from the bottom of the heap. And as she struggled with its fastenings, Bobby turned dejectedly away.

"I'll bet *this* is a hat," she chuckled in excited anticipation.

Hilda and Phyllis exchanged knowing looks.

But the tightly knotted cord would not yield to her small fingers.

"Oh, Father dear, do *please* cut it for me quick!" she begged.

So Father, taking out his big clasp-knife, slashed the string, and the box fell open. But instead of the hat she had expected to find, all it contained was another, somewhat smaller, box.

Sally gave a disappointed grunt.

"Well," she remarked, taking it out and looking it over critically, "that's funny!"

Phyllis snickered.

Then Sally opened the second box, and this disclosed to her bewildered eyes, a third; and this, in turn, a fourth,—and still no present! The children watched with dancing eyes as box

after box came into view, each a trifle smaller than the one preceding it.

Finally, when she had arrived at the tenth, Sally exclaimed in a tone of desperation, "Well, I don't see how they *can* get much little-er! This is the weeniest one I ever saw."

Then she lifted its tiny cover,—and all she found was a shoe button! What a shout went up at sight of it! Even Gussie, who had busied herself about the table in order to watch the fun, let out a wild whoop, and vanished into the kitchen, declaring vociferously, "You can't beat dem chilluns!"

After this, the smaller packages were opened. There were enough presents for a family of children instead of just one little girl,—a five-dollar gold-piece from Father, books, games, and several pretty home-made trifles from Hilda and Phyllis, a beautiful doll from Uncle Roddy, who was in Paris, a bunch of paper roses from Gussie, a box of candy from Carlotta, and many other gifts both large and small.

"I wonder if anybody else has as much fun as

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we do over birthdays," said Sally, leaning back in her chair and gazing at the litter of gay papers which surrounded her and made the room look as if a rainbow had exploded there. Only two presents now remained unopened. Mother looked at them with a puzzled expression.

"Why,—where's Bobby's present for you?" she asked. "I'm sure I put it with the rest. Have any of you seen it?"

They all shook their heads.

"And where—by the way—is Bobby?" queried Father.

As if in answer to his question, a sound came from the hallway, a tinny, rattling sound. They listened anxiously.

"All-l-l-l aboa-ahd! Twain fo' N'Yawk! Choo! Choo! Choo!" came to their ears in a softly droning little voice they recognized.

With a gesture to the others for silence, Father tiptoed to the doorway where he paused and, finger to lips, beckoned them to follow. They did so noiselessly.

There, sprawled on his stomach, lay Bobby,

gazing with eyes of rapture at the coveted object before him,—his birthday gift to Sally. A small tin disk, it was, painted to represent a landscape with brooks and bridges, fields and towns; while round and round its rim, in a never-ending journey, ran an enchanting little train.

How could they know that as he lay there, his body was as empty as a locust's shell, while his spirit travelled to far distant places,—Brakeman, Conductor, *Engineer* of that miniature express?

Mother's eyes were misty as they returned once more to their places, leaving the little fellow to his play. And Gussie, who had taken the opportunity to peep out, also, muttered feelingly,

"Po' li'l lamb! Nobody wouldn't pay no 'tention to 'im, so he jus' look out fo' hisse'f."

"Trust Bobs to do that," said Phyllis.

Sally looked ashamed.

"I 'member now, he asked me to open it," she said, genuinely sorry for her neglect. And her

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face was sober as she picked up one of the two remaining packages and listlessly tore off the paper.

The box inside seemed empty until she shook it; then out dropped a little card on which was printed in large capitals:

LOOK IN MOTHER'S WORK BASKET.

"Ah, ha!" said Mother when Sally, in obedience to the injunction, had run upstairs. "I thought I heard some very mysterious noises in the sewing-room last evening. This explains it."

Hilda looked at Phyllis reproachfully. "You never told me a thing about it, Phyll," she said.

"No," grinned Phyllis. "I wanted to have *this* joke all to myself."

At this moment, Sally returned, breathless, waving aloft a small square of blue cardboard.

"This is all I could find," she announced.

"Let's hear what it says," said Father.

So Sally, though not a skillful reader, by any means, managed to spell out the words:

LOOK IN THE SILVER DRAWER.

So she went to the old mahogany sideboard and pulled out the upper drawer where all the knives and forks and spoons were kept. And here lay another card; and this one bore the inscription:

LOOK ON THE ATTIC STAIRS.

"Oh, my goodness!" exclaimed the excited little girl, her cheeks aflame as she started once more up the long flight of stairs to the second floor.

By this time they were all laughing; so when Sally came back shortly and, with a hopeless air, displayed a card which bade her

LOOK IN THE GARBAGE PAIL.

Hilda nearly had hysterics, and Mother cried in amused remonstrance, "Oh, *Phyllis!*"

"It's all right, Mother," Phyllis answered reassuringly, "Gussie scrubbed it out for the occasion."

But there was no present in the garbage pail, only another card which sent the eager little feet running down cellar to the coal-bin, in whose dark and dusty interior further orders were posted:

LOOK ON THE LOWEST SHELF OF
FATHER'S BOOKCASE,

said the card. And here, at last, her patience was rewarded, for behind a volume of "Huckleberry Finn," there was a small square parcel wrapped in red crêpe paper.

"I bet it's just another joke," she giggled, while they all looked on with interest to see what the box contained.

Then she gave a startled exclamation, and her face grew quite pink.

"What is it?" asked Hilda. "Let's see, Sally."

"It's Phyllis's ring," said Sally in a breathless voice. "The lovely one Uncle Roddy gave her. She mustn't give it to me,—must she, Mother? It's too nice to give away."

Mother looked at Phyllis's glowing face.

"Are you sure you want her to have it, dear?" she asked.

Phyllis nodded. "Course I do," she answered. "It's too small for me, now, and—and, besides—" she hesitated ever so slightly—"Sally loves pretty things so much."

In spite of all her efforts to make it sound natural, Phyllis found her voice getting husky. For the little circlet of gold, with its three small pearls in their quaint and lovely setting, had been one of her most cherished possessions. She cleared her throat impatiently, wondering why they all looked at her so strangely. The ring was hers to give if she wished, and it was awfully embarrassing to have them all so serious about it. She wished some one would *smile*, and began to laugh, rather foolishly, herself.

"Well, anyway," she said, "I made you work for it."

But Sally could not reply. She stood looking at the ring, anxious to accept it, yet feeling that she shouldn't; so Father, seeing that the situation was becoming somewhat strained,

broke the silence by demanding plaintively, "Say, young lady, I wish you'd finish opening your presents. I want my breakspup! I'm *starving!*"

So, at a nod from Mother, Sally slipped the ring over her finger, and turned her attention to the last of her presents.

It was a large, official-looking envelope, and when she had lifted the flap, out upon the table fell eight oblongs of pink pasteboard.

"What are they?" queried the other two girls, craning their necks to see.

"I—don't—know," said Sally, thoroughly perplexed. "What are they, Father?"

"That's for you to guess," teased Father.

Three pairs of brown eyes scanned the slips with absorbed interest.

"Majestic Theatre," they read in unison.
"Admit one."

For a moment there was silence; then Phyllis pronounced a single magic word,—"*Movies!*"

"Father!" they shrieked, "is it,—is it *really* the movies?"

"I'm afraid it is," he admitted gravely, though, behind the absurd mustache, the corners of his mouth were twitching.

"Are you going to take *all* of us,—and Mother, too?"

"If you have no better plans for this afternoon."

"The movies! the movies!" they chanted in an ecstasy, their eyes like stars, their faces radiant. For these children, simply reared, had never seen a moving-picture show.

"Can I go, too?" came a plaintive voice from the hallway as Bobby thrust his face in at the door.

"Why, of course we won't leave *you* out, Bobs," was Father's emphatic answer. "And since the car will hold eight, and there are eight tickets, perhaps Sally would like to invite two of her friends to go with us."

"Oh, I'd love to ask Carlotta," cried Sally without a moment's hesitation.

"And who else?" queried Hilda.

Sally deliberated for a moment. "Wel-l-l,"

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she said at last, "I'll bet Maudie May would like to go."

"Oh, yes,—*do* ask her," agreed the other girls.

That one guest was the daughter of the local banker, the other, the grandchild of their colored maid-of-all-work made no difference to them.

Above their bobbing brown heads, Mother looked at Father with a contented smile.

"Well," she said, "now that this momentous question has been settled, let's finish breakfast."

"I second the motion," said Father, heartily.

So Mother rang for the muffins.

CHAPTER II

RINTY

IT was a merry party that set out that afternoon in the big gray Packard. Father and Mother sat on the front seat with Bobby between them. The four little girls were in back, their bright faces and gay dresses making the dingy old car look (so Father declared) as if the flowers of the garden had commandeered it for a joy-ride.

The idea tickled their fancies.

"I'm the Rose, then," said Hilda. And, indeed, she looked it, in her shell-pink frock, with her flushed cheeks and soft, dark curls.

Phyllis, slim, dark-skinned and bright-eyed as a young robin, surveyed her own lavender dimity, thoughtfully.

"What'll I be?" she asked, turning to the others for advice. "Would Violet do?"

"Oh, no, Phyll," responded Hilda quickly. "Violet doesn't suit you at all. It's such a scared, sort of shrinking little thing. Don't you think Iris is better?"

"Well, p'raps it is," assented Phyllis. "Now let's see if we can think of a good name for Maudie May."

But that young lady was quite capable of making her own decision as she sat very straight and stiff and self-conscious in her spotless white piqué.

"I's a Lily," she announced, gravely. "Dat's what I is."

And they all agreed that this was entirely appropriate.

"Now we must find a flower to match Sally's new dress," they said. This was a hard one, there were so many yellow flowers to choose from,—Daffodil, Marigold, Sunflower, Calendula—each lovely in its way, yet none of them seeming quite to fit Sally's bright, sparkling little face in its frame of straight brown hair.

Poor Sally!—her soul was in revolt at the fact

that her hair did not curl. How she longed for Hilda's soft ringlets, Phyllis's mop of curls, or even Bobby's tight kinks! But to have *straight* hair,—not a wave or a crinkle anywhere! It was disappointing, to say the least. Nature, however, as if to compensate for this neglect, had been generous in the matter of dimples.

"I think Black-eyed Susan would be good," suggested Phyllis.

"Buttercups is yaller," remarked Maudie May.

"But don't you think that Golden Glow is nice?" asked Hilda.

"Just the thing," commented Phyllis. "It isn't a very pretty flower, but its name sounds just the way Sally looks."

Then Bobby, not to be left out of this interesting game, announced in a loud voice that he would be a Dandelion.

"Oh, Bobby!" they all screamed, "who ever heard of a *blue* Dandelion?"

Mother gave him a big squeeze. "You might be our little Periwinkle," she said smiling down at his sober face.

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The mile to the Smith residence was quickly traversed, the children chattering gaily all the way.

As they turned into the driveway leading to the big stone structure which Carlotta called "home," Sally remarked with a sigh, "I wish our house was like Carlotta's."

"I don't," said Phyllis emphatically. "Almost everything in it is too nice to even touch."

"There isn't anything in our house so nice as that,—is there, Mother?" This from Hilda.

"I hope not, darling."

"Carlotta's house is just for grown-ups,—not for little girls, at all," observed Phyllis shrewdly.

"Well, I don't care,—*I* like it," said Sally with a touch of perversity. "It's just like a—a *palace*."

"Humph!—I'd rather have a house than a palace, any day," retorted Phyllis.

And Hilda remarked dreamily, "It isn't a happy-looking house as ours is. Ours is so *friendly*. It always looks as if it were smiling,—doesn't it, Maudie May?"

Maudie May, thus deferred to, became somewhat embarrassed. She showed all her teeth in a wide grin as she replied, "It sure do! De front door looks like a mouf,—allus standin' open, like it was laughin'." And she subsided in a spasm of delighted giggles.

As they drew up under the massive porte-cochère, Carlotta, who had been watching for them, came running down the broad stone steps. She was a slender sprite of a child with great dark eyes and soft, copper-colored hair. Though nearer Hilda's age, she was no larger than Phyllis, and had a shy, suppressed manner which was very appealing. She greeted the elder people prettily; then turned to the children who were feasting their eyes upon her loveliness.

"Oh, Carlotta!" they cried, "How beautiful you look!"

"Just like a yellow rose," said Hilda. "I'm a pink one. We're all flowers this afternoon." And they told her their new names jubilantly.

Carlotta liked the idea immensely. "I'll be

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Mrs. Aaron Ward," she said. "That's the name of Mother's yellow rosebush."

So Mrs. Aaron Ward climbed in and took her seat between Golden Glow and Iris.

Then Mrs. Smith, a fat, florid, fussy woman, came hurrying down the steps with Carlotta's sweater over her arm.

"How do you do, Mr. Brewster!" she exclaimed. "And Mrs. Brewster, too? It was so *dear* of you to invite my kiddy to go with you.—She's been *so* excited ever since you telephoned. For a while, I was afraid she was running a temperature and would have to stay home. It's funny she should get so worked up over just a movie show. She's been so many times with Merritt, my chauffeur, and his wife. But I suppose it's because the *children* are going. It *does* seem to make a difference, somehow,—doesn't it?—Carlotta, are you cold?—Let Mother feel your hands.—I really *do* think you should have worn your coat."

"Oh, it's so warm," protested Mother Brewster.

"Yes, I know it is, now; but it may blow up cold before you get back,—the weather is so changeable these days. So, if you don't mind, I'll just leave this sweater with you, and if it's at all *chilly* in the theatre, will you put it on her? She is *so* delicate, you know, and so *susceptible* to the slightest change in temperature. On the way home, I am *sure* she'll need it,—the breeze from driving is apt to be cold at that time of the day.—Why,—aren't you taking *any* wraps for your kiddies?—Oh, well,—they are such *husky* little things. You should be very thankful. How sweet they all look!—"

Father pulled out his watch. "I'm afraid we'll have to be getting along," he apologized. "This is an event of great importance, you know,—our first experience at the movies,—and we don't want to miss anything."

Mrs. Smith looked incredulous. "Not really!" she gasped. "How *very* interesting! Well, I *do* hope then, for their sakes, that the picture is a good one!"

"Oh, we made sure of *that*," said Father, and

they started off with vociferous good-byes and much waving of hands.

As they drove up Main Street in the thriving little university town of Armitage, and stopped before the ornate entrance of the Majestic Theatre, a silence fell upon the children. The sight of the gay exterior with its bright posters, uniformed attendants and throngs of people, quieted their spirits, awing, yet alluring them with hints of mysteries within.

"A rather big crowd for quiet little Armitage," commented Mother.

"Yes, a picture like this brings them from miles around," said Father.

Then he gave the tickets to the man at the door, and, straightway, they were ushered into that marvellous, glittering place.

"It's like a church—*almost*," whispered Phyllis to Sally when they were in their seats and the first throbbing notes of the organ broke the stillness.

"Only lots prettier," responded Sally gazing raptly at the garish decorations.

They watched with wonder as the lights above them slowly dwindled to mere pin-points, then went out altogether; and the curtains on the great stage parted, revealing a rectangle of gleaming white.

Hilda, sitting next to her father, slipped her hand into his.

“Oh, Father,” she whispered tremulously, “I’m afraid I’m going to cry.”

There followed a moment of breathless suspense, and then the title announcement flashed forth in letters clear and startling:

RINTY, THE WONDER-DOG.

There was another pause, a flicker of light and, suddenly, upon the screen, his sad eyes gazing into theirs, appeared the noble figure of a great police dog.

There was a long-drawn, worshipful “Oh-h-h!” from the children as the creature seemed to spring to life before their very eyes. From the first moment, they adored him, and through six reels sat, hopelessly enthralled, while

the magical story unfolded; in their childish credulity, accepting as fact the simple tale of this dog's courage and love for his master.

All too soon it was over; the lights flared up, the people filed out and, reluctantly, they left that palace of their dreams, and took their places in the car once more, subdued, but gloriously happy.

But on the homeward trip their tongues were loosed. "Rinty!—Rinty!—Rinty!"—they could talk of nothing else; his beauty, his courage, his almost-human understanding.

Even Carlotta, to whom a movie was no extraordinary treat, waxed enthusiastic over it, and said as they dropped her at her door, "Thank you, Mrs. Brewster. I had a lovely time. The picture was lots nicer than 'Partners in Divorce' that I saw last week with Merritt and Stella, an' it was better than 'Soulmates', too."

And Maudie May expressed her praise in extravagant words of her own coining. "Dat's de excitin'est picture an' de 'straordinariest dog I ebber *did* see," she avowed with emphasis.

"Well," said Father, laughing, "I take it our party was a success."

Mother smiled assent, then pointed to the west, where thunderheads were gathering.

"I think we'd better hurry, Tom," she said.
"A storm is coming."

CHAPTER III

THE END OF A PERFECT DAY

BOBBY was asleep when they reached home, well ahead of the storm; but he roused when Father carried him in and laid him on the couch in the living-room.

“I’m hungry,” he murmured drowsily, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

“Gussie has supper all ready, darling,” said Mother, returning from a hurried trip to the kitchen in time to hear his plaintive remark. “Come, girls,— we’ll sit right down.”

But though Bobby ate his supper with the ravenous enthusiasm of a shipwrecked sailor, the little girls had no desire for food. Indifferent, even, to the splendors of the glimmering birthday cake, choicest specimen of Gussie’s culinary art, they merely toyed with what was set before them, living, again, in blissful retrospect,

each moment of that gorgeous afternoon. But we all have our limitations; and what, after all, is a birthday cake, when one is surfeited with pleasure?

Mother found it hard to quiet them and gather them, as was her custom, about the piano for the evening "sing", with which they always closed their day. For the storm, now close at hand and threatening to break at any moment, added a note of uneasiness to the general excitement.

"Come, now," said Mother, seating herself at the piano, and lifting Bobby up on the bench beside her, "we'll let Sally choose the song tonight. What shall it be?"

They gathered round her, whispering, suggesting, laughing, a pretty sight, so Father thought, as, with pipe and book neglected, he watched them from his easy-chair under the reading-lamp.

"Sing 'Twamp, twamp, twamp,'" begged Bobby.

"Oh, Bobs, you *always* choose that one," re-

monstrated Sally, "I wish we could sing about a dog, to-night."

"I know one!" said Phyllis. "'Once there lived a little man',—that has a dog in it."

"Oh, yes, yes, yes!" cried the others, delightedly. "We haven't sung that one in a long time."

So Mother struck a few chords on the piano, and then the old house rang with the words of the tuneful little ballad:

"Once there lived a little man,
Where a little river ran,
And he had a little farm and little dairy O!
And he had a little plough,
And a little dappled cow,
Which he often called his pretty little Fairy O!"

"And his dog he called Fidelle,
For he loved his master well,
And he had a little pony for his pleasure O!
In a sty not very big,
He'd a frisky little pig,
Which he often called his little piggy treasure O!"

Here, Bobby interrupted their singing. "Muvver!" he exclaimed excitedly, "I hear a funny noise like some one poundin'!"

“It’s only the wind, dear,” answered Mother. “A piece of the tin gutter-pipe has come loose, and it’s blowing that.—Tom, we ought to get that mended, dear, it might fall and hurt somebody.”

“Once his little daughter Ann,
With a pretty little can,
Went a-milking when the morning sun was beaming O!

sang the children.

“Boom! Boom! Boom!” went the thunder, rumbling away into an ominous silence.

With hands over their ears, they continued the song, Father joining in with his pleasant baritone.

“But when she returned, I don’t know how,
She stumbled o’er the plough,
And the cow was much astonished at her screaming O!

“Little maid cried out in vain,
While the milk ran o’er the plain,
Little piggy running after it so gaily O!
And Fidelle not far behind,
For a taste was much inclined,
So he pulled back piggy, squealing, by his taily O!

“Such a clatter then began,
Quite alarmed the little man,
Who came running from without his little stable O!
Pony stepped on doggy’s toes,
Doggy snapped at piggy’s nose,
Piggy made as much a noise as he was able O!

“Then to make my story short,
Little pony, with a snort,
Lifted up his little heels so very clever O!
The little man came tumbling down,
Which almost broke his little crown,
And only made the matter worse than ever O!”

“Sing it again!” ordered Bobby, who had left the group at the piano after the third verse, and taken refuge on Father’s knee where the glare of the almost incessant lightning was not so easily visible.

“Not to-night, sweetheart,” said Mother. “It’s been an exciting day,—high time you little folks were in bed.”

“Oh, Mother,—no! Just a little longer!” they coaxed. “We’re not the least bit sleepy.”

But she would not listen to their entreaties.

“Kiss Father good-night,” she said. Then Mother marshalled the protesting little band

up the well-worn treads of the old stairway to the cheerful room above, where four small beds, turned down and waiting, invited their tired bodies to enter and be ferried across to the land of dreams.

The storm was now at its height, and the whole house shook and quivered with the fury of it.

"I'm 'fraid," whimpered Bobby as Mother tucked him into his crib, seeing that he was far too sleepy for prayers.

"Isn't he a silly?" scoffed Sally, sitting down on the floor and beginning to unbuckle her little white sandals. Then a sudden thought struck her, and she paused with one shoe in her hand, her face radiant with hope.

"Mother," she said in a hesitating voice, "do you s'pose we've got enough money to buy Rinty? Do you s'pose Rinty's master would sell him?"

"*Sell him!*" screamed Hilda and Phyllis in one breath. "What!—after Rinty had saved his life?—He couldn't,—could he, Mother?"

Poor dears!—she could not disillusion them.
“No,” she answered, “of course not.”

“But his master might *die*,” persisted Sally.
“Maybe we could buy him then.”

The idea appealed to them; they discussed its possibilities, feverishly.

“Oh—I don’t s’pose we can ever have Rinty,” said Phyllis, at length, with a deep sigh, “but if we could only have a dog *like* him! Tricksy’s a dear, of course, an’ I love her terribly, but she can’t climb up ladders an’ jump through windows and save people’s lives like Rinty.” There was a short despondent silence.

“Maybe we could teach her,” suggested Hilda. “I don’t think it would be hard. She’s so smart. An’, anyway, we could hold a blanket under her while she was learning, so she wouldn’t get hurt in case she fell.”

“Oh, good! Let’s start to-morrow! Won’t it be fun?” cried Phyllis and Sally together.

But Mother shook her head.

“Listen, children,” she said gravely. “You must not be rough with Tricksy now. She needs

the best care you can give her. For some day soon she's going to have a little family."

"What! Puppies? Oh, *wonderful!* How many, Mother? Will there be one apiece?" Their questions came in torrents.

"Wait and see," said Mother, smiling. "Come, now,—your prayers!"

With shining eyes, they knelt about her knee and offered up their earnest supplications. Prayers took longer to-night: there was a new friend to be remembered.

Then came good-night kisses, and she tucked them in their beds.

"Oh, Mother, such a wonderful birthday," said Sally, burrowing into her pillow like a little mole.

"We'll never, *never* forget it," came in drowsy tones from Phyllis.

"I'm 'fraid," murmured Bobby in his sleep.

Mother paused in the doorway, looking at them tenderly.

"Good-night,—good-night, my darlings," she said. "I *love* you."

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"Good-night, Mother dear," they chorused sleepily.

Then she snapped out the light. But as she turned to go, Hilda called her name. She went to her, and took the little groping hand.

"What is it, dear?" she asked.

"Mother," whispered Hilda, "do you think—if I—prayed—*hard*—oh, *awfully* hard,—that maybe—one of the puppies would be—like—like Rinty?" Almost as she said it, she was asleep.

"A pretty big order for poor little Tricksy," thought Mother as she ran downstairs. "I wonder if she's out in all this storm. I told Gussie to be sure to let her in."

She went to the door and opened it. A gust of wind-swept rain beat in upon her, drenching her; and then, from out the darkness, somewhere near her feet, a small voice said, "I want my mother!"

CHAPTER IV

NATALIE MAKES A DECISION

TOM BREWSTER, deep in the problems of a new detective story, was roused from his absorbing deductions by a cry from the hall; and springing to his feet in some apprehension, found a *real* mystery confronting him. His wife stood in the doorway, bearing in her arms what, at first sight, appeared to be a large and extremely wet bundle of clothing. Closer inspection, however, disclosed two grubby little bare legs and a pair of large and very frightened blue eyes.

"Why—why, Molly,—what on earth—?" he stammered, eyeing the bundle in amazement. But as he realized what it was, he hastened to wheel forward an easy-chair.

"Where did *that* come from?" he asked with a bewildered air.

"She was on the front porch, Tom,—in all this storm," answered Molly, seating herself, and bending for a closer view of the little face. And the child, with one long, questioning look into the compassionate brown eyes above her, snuggled down into her lap with a deep, shuddering sigh.

"Poor little thing!" said Molly Brewster. "She's completely exhausted and wet to the skin. I must get her clothes off at once. Will you run upstairs, Tom, and get a nightgown out of Sally's dresser and a shawl out of mine? You won't wake up the children. They're all dead to the world by this time."

And as Tom left the room, she began to peel off the child's sodden clothing, crooning softly to her as she did so.

"You poor, precious darling, did you get all wet and frightened? Never mind, you're quite safe, now. We'll take care of you to-night, and in the morning, we'll find Mother. What happened, sweetheart? Did you run away?—or get lost?—or what?"

At each of these questions, Natalie shook her head.

"Can't you tell me how you got here?" Molly persisted gently.

"I—I—I walked," said Natalie, in a small, trembling voice.

"Where from, baby girl?"

Natalie's chin began to quiver. "Over there," she answered vaguely, waving one arm in an indefinite gesture. "A long—long way,—an' it rained,—an' I was frightened." Her eyes filled at the thought of what she had endured.

Molly cuddled the child close. "Well, we're not going to talk about it any more to-night," she said. "You're just going to have something to eat, and then pop into bed; and in the morning, we'll hear all about it."

And with these words, she took the nightgown from Tom, who had procured it in short order, and slipped it over the curly head; then wrapped the small body in the folds of her shawl.

"Now, then, we're all comfy," she said soothingly. "And in a minute we'll have a little

warm milk. Tom, dear, will you ask Gussie to heat some for us?"

She patted the small hand as she spoke, and, smoothing back the yellow curls, kissed the tired, tear-stained little face. All the "mother" in her yearned over the pathetic little creature.

"You're somebody's darling," she said to herself, "I wonder whose."

And Natalie, comforted both in mind and body, relaxed her little form and closed her weary eyes.

A few moments later, Tom returned from his errand to the kitchen, while Gussie followed close at his heels with a pitcher of steaming milk, a glass, and a plate of bread and butter.

At sight of the child, she stopped abruptly, almost dropping her load.

"Lawsy me! Where dat baby-chile come from?" she demanded, her black eyes popping out.

"We don't know yet, Gussie," said Molly, filling the glass and holding it up to the eager lips.

And Natalie, regarding them with fixed and

solemn stare above its milky rim, drank greedily, unmindful of their pitying concern.

"Bress her heart!" cried Gussie in warm-hearted delight, gathering up the pile of wet garments from the floor. "She mos' starved to deff, dat's what she is. She act like she can't drink fas' enough!"

"Don't you want to take off her shoes and socks, Tom?" asked Molly as she poured another glassful of milk. "Then I can feed her the rest of this while you're doing it. She's so sleepy, poor dear, she can hardly tell where her mouth is."

"Of course I do," responded Tom, sitting down on the floor and taking the small feet in his big, gentle hands. But when he had stripped off their wet coverings, he gave a low whistle. "Look, honey!" he cried in real distress, "just look at them!—They're all blistered!"

Molly gave one glance; then, with a catch in her voice, she exclaimed, "Why, you poor little soul! Where could you have been to get your feet like that?" Gussie, with woful

lamentations, had started for a basin of warm water.

Natalie found it good to have her face and hands sponged off, and to dip her feet in the warm suds. It took the ache and sting away as if by magic. She sat watching Gussie, and listening to her low-toned utterances in a thoughtful, though disinterested manner.

"You po' li'l lambie! You suah done some walkin'. Dere, now, Gussie wash all de pain away. 'Twon't nebber come no more."

There was something suspiciously like a tear in Gussie's eye as she spoke, and when she dried the little feet with a soft towel, no dainty, perfumed hands could have been more tender than were Gussie's big, coarse, black ones. Kneeling there before the child, she gazed for some moments at the lovely little face; then she said in a faltering voice, "Has you noticed, Mis' Molly, —'scuse my speakin' of it—but has you noticed how much she look lak'—lak' li'l Jeanie?"

"Yes, Gussie," answered Molly, "when I first saw her face looking up at me out of the darkness,

it was quite startling. She is like her in a good many ways. How strange it should be so!"

Gussie nodded her head solemnly. "Yassum," she said, "when I come in froo dat do' an' see her on yo' lap,—Lawsy!—I took such a turn! Seemed lak' I mus' be dreamin'."

She bent closer to the child, touching the golden curls with reverent fingers.

"Dere's de same yaller hair," she continued, "an' de big blue eyes wid de long, curly eye-winkers, an' de little roun' face wid dimples in de cheeks." She paused to rub a gnarled hand across her glistening eyes. "Yassum,—jes' lak' dat little bressed angel," she concluded, getting stiffly to her feet.

But Natalie heard none of this, for too weary now, even to eat, she had gone sound asleep, all troubles momentarily forgotten.

Fearful lest a change might waken her, Molly, herself, carried the child upstairs to her own room, where a small cot-bed stood always ready in case of such emergencies as bad dreams or slight indispositions. But when she went to

put her down, Natalie clung to her, crying piteously.

"Don't be afraid, sweetheart," soothed Molly. "I'm not going to leave you. See, this little cot where you are going to sleep, is close beside my bed. All night I shall be right here. I'll leave a light, too, so you can see me."

Comforted by these assurances, Natalie released her.

Rain was still falling next morning when she opened her eyes to an unfamiliar room. But after a moment of bewilderment, she discovered Molly Brewster by the window, sewing; and, like a flash, her memory of the night before returned. She did not stir at once, however, but lay there watching Molly, and puzzling her little brain as to who this kind new friend might be. The pleasant face, smooth brown hair coiled loosely in her neck, trim white linen dress and spotless shoes, stirred vagrant recollections.

"Are you a nurse?" she asked.

Molly jumped to her feet and hurried to the bedside. "I didn't know you were awake," she

cried, bending over her. "No, I'm not a nurse. Do you think I look like one?"

Natalie regarded her soberly. "You look like Miss Briggs," she said after a moment.

"Was Miss Briggs *your* nurse?" asked Molly.

Natalie shook her head vigorously. "No," she answered, "*I* wasn't sick. *Mother* was. She had the flu, an' she was in bed, an' I couldn't even see her."

Molly sat down on the edge of the bed and lifted the little girl onto her lap.

"Well, now," she said, "first off, we're going to get dressed and have our breakfast, and after that we can hear all about Mother and—*everything*." She paused to laugh lightly, and then added, "We don't even know each other's names, yet, do we? Mine is Mrs. Brewster. Will you tell me yours?"

"Natalie," replied the child.

"That's a pretty name," said Molly, "but what's the rest of it?"

Natalie pondered the question seriously. Finally she said, "That's all, 'cept Miss Natalie."

"You darling!" Molly gave her a gentle squeeze; then setting her down, she bustled into the adjoining bathroom and began to run the water for her bath.

"Do you know, dear," she said when it was ready, "there are four children downstairs who are just *dying* to see you. Do you think you'd like to play with them?"

"I don't know," responded Natalie. "Are they nice?"

"Well, *I* think they are," smiled Molly. "And I hope you will, too."

"Once I played with some little girls in the park," said Natalie, her eyes sparkling at the remembrance. "They were awful dirty, but I didn't care. I *like* dirty children. Are the children downstairs dirty?"

"Not just this minute," replied Molly. "But an hour from now I presume they'll all look like little pigs."

"Oh," cried Natalie, hugging herself excitedly, "I want to play an' get all dirty, too! Dirt's nice, but mud's *more* nicer."

"What a dear, quaint, funny little thing!" was Molly's thought as, slipping off the child's night-dress, she carried her to the bathroom and set her in the tub. The child had a beautiful body, flawless, save for a single blemish, a mark like a small, red clover-leaf, on her left arm just below the shoulder.

"What's this, dear?" asked Molly, touching it gently. "Did you hurt yourself?"

Natalie craned her neck to see; then she laughed. "That's not a hurty-spot," she answered in amusement. "Dulcie said—" she checked herself, reluctant to continue; for, in the midst of such satisfying realities, Dulcie and all that she stood for, had, momentarily, faded from her mind. She glanced furtively at Molly who, sensing some trouble, yet thinking best to ignore it, went on soaping her back as if she had not heard, hoping, in this way to win the confidence she so much desired.

Presently, however, she asked in a matter-of-fact voice, "What was it you were telling me that Dulcie said?"

The tone was reassuring.

"Dulcie said it was where the stork bit me," replied Natalie.

"And who is Dulcie? Your sister?"

Natalie's face clouded. It was plain to see the subject was not a pleasing one.

"No," she said shortly. Then, in a sudden burst of anger, as unexpected as it was vehement, she cried, "Dulcie told a lie! She's bad! I hate her!"

"Here is something that needs looking into," said Molly to herself.

But she did not press Natalie with further questions. Instead, she kissed the little wrathful, trembling lips, and remarked quietly, "Well, we won't talk about her any more, not *now*, at any rate. See, here are all your own clothes that Gussie has washed and ironed." For Gussie, with warm-hearted zeal, had arisen betimes, in order to perform this labor of love; bringing the freshly laundered clothing to the bedroom door with the whispered comment, "She shore do belong to quality folks, Mis' Molly. Dere ain't

a mite o' lace on anythin'; on'y jus' de finest han'-sewin'."

By the time Natalie was dressed, she and Molly were chatting like old friends, with all unpleasant thoughts forgotten. Then, hand in hand, they hastened down to the dining-room where the children awaited their coming with ill-concealed impatience.

Many were the questions they had found to ask about her; and many and wild their conjectures as to how and whence she had come. Hilda's belief was that she had escaped from gypsies who had kidnaped her; Phyllis suggested that she might have run away from an Orphan Asylum where, no doubt, she had been ill-treated; Sally had an idea that perhaps she had fallen from a passing automobile; while Bobby was strongly of the opinion that she had dropped from the clouds when the thunder came.

"That must have been her pounding that Bobby spoke about when we were all singing," said Hilda.

"Why that's a fact," agreed Father, "I'd forgotten all about it."

"Are we going to keep her, Father?" asked Sally.

"Oh, we can't do that," replied Father, hastily.

"Will you put an ad. in the paper like you did for the pocketbook you found?"

"I think not. We can trust *her* people to do the advertising."

"But s'pose they shouldn't,—s'pose they didn't want her,—would we keep her, then?"

"Well, for a little while, at any rate."

"S'pose she turned out to be a princess an' they offered hundreds an' hundreds of dollars to get her back," said Hilda, romantically.

Phyllis's eyes danced. "O my! Then Father could get a new car!" she cried, charmed at the prospect.

"Or Mother could get that rug she wants for the living-room," interposed Hilda.

"Maybe I could get a pony," said Bobby, meditatively.

"O-O-O-O!—I know something better yet!"

Sally fairly squealed in her excitement.
“*Rinty!* Maybe we could get *Rinty!*”

Father laughed. “You haven’t seen the little girl, yet,” he reminded them. “When you do, the chances are, you’ll decide you’d rather have her than anything that money can buy.”

Sally drew a long breath. “Well, I *have* seen *Rinty*,” she said in a voice which spoke volumes.

So absorbed were the children in discussing the wonderful possibilities of this new idea, that they did not hear the approaching footsteps, so that Molly and Natalie were fairly in the room before they were aware of their coming.

Tom saw them, however, and jumped to his feet. “Here she is!” he exclaimed in a tone of exultation.

Four pairs of brown eyes met the blue ones in a gaze of frank admiration, but not a word was said. It was as if they all had suddenly been stricken dumb. In silence, Molly lifted Natalie into her chair and tucked a napkin underneath her chin.

"This is Natalie," she said, "our new little friend."

Then Sally observed with characteristic candor, "She looks just like Carlotta's big French doll."

"She does, for all the world," assented Molly, handing Natalie a glass of orange juice.

"Now, children," she continued merrily, "we're all going to have a good time together for a few days until we find Natalie's mother. After breakfast, you can take her to the playroom and show her your toys. We want to make her happy while she's here."

Natalie listened gravely. Then she looked about her, at the cheerful, homey room, the children's happy faces, Tricksy on the window-seat, and, out beyond, the blooming, rain-drenched garden. Then she made a definite announcement.

"I'm going to stay for *always*," she said.

CHAPTER V

AMATEUR DETECTIVES

BREAKFAST over, the children raced off to the playroom, each eager to do the honors; and Tom and Molly were left alone to talk matters over. They drew their chairs up to the hearth in the living-room, where a wood-fire crackled merrily; and for some moments, neither of them spoke. Then Molly looked at Tom, and her eyes twinkled.

"Well, what do you make of it, Mr. Detective?" she asked.

Tom did not respond at once to her light-hearted banter. He lighted his pipe, and settled himself comfortably; then he said, with a thoughtful pucker between his eyes, "The case certainly is baffling. We are handicapped from the very start by the fact that Natalie is too young to give us any definite or reliable informa-

tion. Who she is and where she comes from are things we shall have to find out for ourselves. I doubt if she can help us any."

"No," said Molly. "The only information I could get from her was very sketchy."

"Did you ask her where she lives?"

"Yes, and she said, 'Oh, lots of places. Once I lived by the ocean, and once I lived in a big boat'."

"H'm," mused Tom, "her people are evidently travelers. What about her father? Did you ask about him?"

"Yes, but you know how children are. She just said, 'He went away', and that was all there was to *that*!"

"Has she spoken of any one at all?"

"Well, there's Dulcie, she seems to be afraid of her, and to hate her for some reason. And there's a Miss Briggs who was her mother's nurse; and then there's some one else named Gloria."

"That might be a sister."

"I imagine so. Just after I put her to bed,

she half woke up and looked about her, whimpering; and when I went to her, she asked where Gloria was."

"And she hasn't referred to her at all this morning?"

"No, that's what puzzles me, her quiet acceptance of us in place of her own family. It's so unnatural, almost as if she had decided to wipe them off her slate forever."

"That *is* queer," agreed Tom. "Especially in so young a child; and one who gives the impression of having been well cared for. Her manners are good, she is dressed with unusual taste and, in every way, has the appearance of a child who has been carefully trained, and is accustomed to the better things of life."

"Who do you suppose this Dulcie is?" asked Molly after a short silence. "Do you think she's an older sister, or a playmate,—or what?"

"Her nursemaid, I imagine. And this, to my mind, would indicate that *her* people have considerable means; for, in this day and generation, only the rich can afford the luxury of servants."

Molly burst out laughing. "How do you account for Gussie, then?" she challenged.

"Oh, Gussie doesn't count, she's more or less of an institution?" he replied.

The fire burned low, and Molly took the bellows and, kneeling on the floor puffed it into life again.

"Do you think it's a case of kidnaping?" she asked, rising to her feet.

"It seems to me the most plausible explanation," replied Tom.

"Not to me," said Molly. "If she had been kidnaped, how did she get here? Why wasn't she held for ransom?"

"There might be various reasons to account for that," answered Tom. "Suppose, for instance, this Dulcie were some former maid, discharged for what she considered a trifling offense. Piqued at her dismissal, she revenges herself by kidnaping the child. But not being a criminal by nature, she gets cold feet as soon as she learns the penalty for a crime such as hers. And not daring to keep the child, nor yet return her, she

gets out of her scrape in the only way which presents itself; simply abandons her to her own resources. Doesn't that fit in with all the facts as we know them?"

Molly laughed. "A very thrilling plot, Mr. Detective!" she chaffed. "You should have been a writer of mystery stories instead of only a professor of history at the University."

She moved over on the wide arm of his chair, laying her cheek caressingly against his tousled hair; and presently she sighed, "O dear, I can't believe as you do. That would be too dreadful. No one, I don't care *how* revengeful they were, could turn that darling baby out, and on such a night. It's unthinkable! No, there is—there *must* be—some other explanation."

Tom puffed away at his pipe thoughtfully for a few moments; then he asked, "Why do you suppose she thought her mother was here?"

"She says Dulcie told her so."

"Then that means that either Dulcie, herself, had been misinformed, or was mistaken in the house, or else told a deliberate falsehood."

Molly suddenly sat up straight, her eyes very bright. "Why, that must be what she meant when she said, 'Dulcie told a lie,'" she exclaimed excitedly.

"Exactly so," agreed Tom. "Well, that gives us a line on Dulcie. The question now is, how did she get here without having any one see her? It's quite evident that no one did."

"And she must have walked so far, too," said Molly, pityingly.

"I wonder which direction she could have come from," mused Tom, as if thinking aloud. "The Turnpike is the only good road through this section. To judge by the condition of her feet, she must have walked a considerable distance before reaching our house. Now, we know she couldn't have come from the direction of Armitage, for we were over that part of the road, ourselves, late in the day, and saw no signs of her. And beyond us, it's a straight three miles to Curtiss Plains with farms on either side. Why wasn't she taken in by some farmer's wife, or picked up by a passing car?—The Turnpike

is a State road, and at this season traffic is heavy. I should think some one would have seen her and given her a lift."

"It's beyond me, I must confess," said Molly wearily.

But Tom suddenly struck his knee a resounding whack. "I have it!" he cried exultantly, springing to his feet and beginning to pace, excitedly, up and down. "I wonder that neither of us thought of it before!"

"What?" asked Molly, breathlessly.

"The Hobbs Hollow road!" said Tom. "Nobody ever uses it any more."

"Except Amos," Molly reminded him.

Tom smiled. "Oh, yes,—Amos!" he agreed. "He only uses it because it's a short cut from his farm; and poor old Nellie is so used to it, I doubt if she would consent to his using any other. But don't you see, dear, that would explain everything? If she came by that road—and I'm convinced she did—there was little chance of anybody seeing her, and our house would have been the most natural one for her to come to,

since the road runs into the Turnpike just beyond our property."

Molly brooded over the theory. It certainly did seem practicable. But, even this idea had its difficulties. "How did she get on the Hobbs Hollow road?" she asked. "As you say, no one travels it. I don't believe an automobile *could*. And how else would she get there? She must have been set down where the road intersects with another. That would be the Oldfield road, wouldn't it? Well, that would explain, then, why she had to walk so far, for it must be three or four miles to that."

"Five," said Tom, tersely.

"Poor little soul, no wonder her feet were blistered!" cried Molly.

Tom walked over to the window and looked out. The rain was still falling in a gentle drizzle.

"Honey," he said suddenly, "I believe I'll go out and walk along that road for a couple of miles. I want to see if there are any traces of her having come that way. The rain would have obliterated any footprints, but I'm sort

of hoping I'll find *something* that will prove that we are right."

Molly jumped to her feet. "I'll go with you, Mr. Sleuth-hound!" she cried gaily. "Just wait until I get my rain togs!" And she ran upstairs to change her dress and shoes.

Ten minutes later, the two of them, oilskin clad, and eager as children going adventuring, were picking their way over the ruts and ridges of the Hobbs Hollow road; scanning each dripping bush and miry hummock for some clue, however slight, which might show that the little wanderer had come that way.

For a long time they found nothing,—no trace of any living thing, save the wild life of the fields and woodlands,—and had about decided to turn back, when, suddenly, Molly spied something in the road ahead, a single gay speck of color, flaunting itself in that drab landscape, like a banner leading to victory after the apparent hopelessness of their quest.

With a shout of triumph, she ran and pulled it from the ooze in which it was imbedded, cry-

ing as she did so, "Oh, Tom, we were right! This proves that she has been here!"

Tom took the object from her and examined it gingerly. "What is it?" he asked. "A rag doll?"

"A *Lenci* doll," explained Molly, "and a perfect beauty. It must have cost all kinds of money, for they're fearfully expensive."

"Well, I'll have to take your word for it," said Tom. "Just at present, she looks like something that the cat dragged in. But let's take her home and scrape off a few layers of mud, and then see if Natalie recognizes her."

And with hearts considerably lighter, they retraced their footsteps.

As soon as they reached home, Molly set to work to clean the doll. It was a task requiring extraordinary skill; but Molly, through much practice, had become an adept in the art of conquering mud-stains. In this instance the results were far better than she had dared anticipate, for when she had finished, the dainty creature seemed little the worse for her un-

fortunate experience, and smiled fatuously on the world once more, as though well pleased with her restoration to respectability.

Molly next sought the playroom, where the sound of happy voices told her that the children were still busy. Leaving the doll on a table just outside the door, she entered, smiling at the pleasant sight which met her eyes.

Even on a gloomy day the room was cheerful, for the entire wing had been given over to it, so it had windows on three sides. Between these windows, which were curtained with gray dimity, ran low bookshelves and built-in toy cupboards; and above these hung a few good colored prints of such pictures as children love. Here at the right was Raeburn's "Boy with a Rabbit"; just beyond, a sketch of squirrels by Dürer; while at the far end of the room hung a Jessie Wilcox Smith panel, entitled, "The Five Senses." The walls and woodwork were a soft green; the floor covered with a simple-patterned green and gray linoleum; the furniture, small in size, and painted to harmonize with the woodwork. In

one corner, stood a dolls' house; in another, a battered rocking-horse held sway; while toys of every description, and in every stage of wear and tear, littered the floor in childlike confusion, giving the room the appearance of a disorderly, though extremely interesting, toy shop.

Side by side on the window-seat at the end of the room, Bob and Natalie were absorbed in a dilapidated copy of "Mother Goose." The brown head and the golden one bent close above its well-thumbed pages; while Bobby chanted the familiar words in a gentle, sing-song voice, following the text with one chubby forefinger in an absurd pretense of reading.

With a fond glance at the artful little impostor, Molly turned her attention to the three other children who, cross-legged upon the floor, were occupied with scissors, paste-pot, and bits of bright crêpe paper.

"Look, Mother!" they shouted at sight of her, "we're getting a bedroom ready for Tricksy, over there in the corner by the dolls' house. We've brought her basket in, and we're making bas-

sinets, so when the puppies come, they'll have a place to sleep. See, we made them out of old shoe-boxes and some pieces of whalebone Gussie gave us. Aren't they sweet?"

They proudly displayed their handiwork: ingenious little beds with canopied tops and ruffled paper trimmings.

Molly examined their work delightedly. "They're just too cunning for words," she said. "You've made them beautifully, too. I always love to see you do your work so well."

"We've got three all done," said Sally, giving a final dab of paste to a refractory ruffle, "All, but the bedding, Mother, and we haven't got anything to use for sheets."

"I think I have an old summer blanket upstairs," said Molly, after a moment's reflection. "If that will do, you may have it to cut up."

"Oh, splendid! Just the thing!" cried the two older girls; while Sally jumped to her feet, exclaiming, "Where is it? I'll run and get it! Shall I, Mother?"

"No," answered Molly, amused at her eager-

ness. "I'll have to look it up. But, before I do, I have a little surprise. Come here, all of you." And stepping back into the hall, she picked up the doll.

"See what Father and I found out on the Hobbs Hollow road!" she said, holding it up before their wondering eyes.

Before the words had left her lips, or the children could express their amazement, there was a cry from Natalie. "It's Gloria!" she cried, her face fairly radiant; and snatching the doll from Molly's hands, she clasped it to her bosom, kissing it and crooning over it in a rapture of delight. "My darling, darling Gloria," she murmured, "did you get lost out in the rain? An' did you think I'd gone away and left you? An' did you miss me?" Then, turning to the children, she said, with a sorrowful shake of her head, "I wanted her *awfully* much all night; but she wasn't there at all."

Molly knelt down on the floor beside her, and gathered child and doll into her motherly arms. "Now, sweetheart," she said gently, "don't you

want to tell us how you and Gloria got away out there on that road all by yourselves?"

The children moved nearer, an interested circle.

"'Way out on the Hobbs Hollow road?" Phyllis exclaimed incredulously, "Why, Natalie, that's ever'n ever so far. Sometimes, Mother lets us drive out there with Amos to pick berries."

Above Gloria's tangled curls, Natalie surveyed them soberly. "It *was* a far way," she stated with the conviction of one whose wisdom has been gained through sad experience. "I walked, an' walked, an' walked, an' I tried to find my mother, but she wasn't *anywhere*. An' I was hot an' tired, an' I got *awful* hungry; an' then the thunder came, an' I cried, but nobody heard me. *Not nobody*", she repeated with an emphatic shake of her head. "An' pretty soon it got dark, an' then I came to *this* house, an' then I wasn't scared any more at all." She looked at them impressively. It was plain that she enjoyed the recital of her woes.

"Bless your dear heart," said Molly, kissing her.

Natalie nestled close. "I like this house," she said confidingly, "I want to live here."

Molly gave her a hearty squeeze. "But you forgot to tell us how you got on that road," she persisted. "Did you ride there in a car?"

Natalie nodded. "It was a big green car," she told them gravely. "It went awful fast, an' I was scared. Dulcie was scared, too. She told him he mustn't go so fast. She said we would be 'rested.'

"Told whom?" questioned Molly, eagerly.

"Why—why, the man—the man with red hair," said Natalie. Tears welled up into her big blue eyes as the memory of that experience returned. She laid her head upon Molly's shoulder, and began to sob. "He was a *bad* man," she wailed. "He was cross, an' he said bad words, an' he called me a—a b-brat."

Molly held the little shaking form close, while the children hovered about with shocked faces and loud expressions of sympathy.

"It would serve him right if he *did* get arrested," declared Phyllis hotly.

"An' sent to prison," added Sally.

Bobby was strongly in favor of personal violence as the only fitting penalty; while Hilda, too overcome for words, at the sight of Natalie's grief, could only stroke her hand and try to wipe her tears away.

Then Molly, realizing that any further questioning at this time would be useless, rose quickly to her feet.

"Hark!" she exclaimed, "the old clock's striking twelve! Something tells me Gussie has made gingerbread for lunch. Can you smell it? Now, while you go and wash your hands, I'll try to find that blanket."

And amid shrieks of laughter, she raced them up the stairs.

CHAPTER VI

NEWS FROM UNCLE RODDY

SOMETIMES in the night the rain stopped, and the morning broke bright and cool, with a gentle breeze, and that freshness and sparkle which so often follow a drenching rain. It was, indeed, as Bobby remarked between mouthfuls of cereal, "a boofully day."

After the sun and wind had dried things up a bit, the children climbed up into the bower to play. This was a fenced-in platform about ten feet square, built on the low, wide-spreading limbs of an old apple tree in the side yard. A long flight of steps led up to it; and here, as safe and snug as birds in a nest, they were wont to spend many happy hours.

Hilda and Phyllis took their sewing-kits, for the bedding had yet to be made for the bassinets

before they would be ready for their expected occupants. Sally, who was rather inclined to shirk, had left the making of her bedclothes to the two older girls, and was now busy blowing soap-bubbles with Bob and Natalie. A pan of suds stood on a bench conveniently near the railing so that, as fast as the bubbles were made, the children could throw them out over the edge and watch them float across the lawn, where Tricksy, with ears alert and stumpy tail wagging, stood waiting to give chase. She found a weird fascination in these strange balls which, the moment she was sure she had them, vanished, leaving nothing but an unpleasant taste behind.

"I'm going to blow a big, *big*, *BIG* one and send it 'way across the ocean to Uncle Roddy," announced Sally as she dipped her pipe in the frothy mixture. "P'raps it'll tell him we miss him an' want him to come home."

The two little ones, charmed with the fancy, watched her as with cheeks distended, she blew and blew until the wavering, iridescent sphere was nearly the size of her head. Then with a

flip of the hand she set it free, and the wayward breeze, seizing the pretty plaything, sent it skimming through the tree-tops and out over the hedge into the Turnpike beyond. For a moment it seemed to hang there, motionless; then —pouff!—and it was gone!

"I don't know whether it really went, or whether it just busted," said Sally as they strained their eyes to see. "But wasn't it a beauty?"

"I want to blow a big one, too," said Bobby, whose efforts, thus far, had been futile. "I want to make a big one like yours, Sally."

But Sally, engrossed in teaching Natalie the art of bubble-blowing, paid no heed to his plaintive remark; and so he set to work again, blowing with all the strength of his small body, but all to no avail.

"They all bweak," he said, dejectedly, after another series of failures.

"P'raps you blow too hard, Bobs," said Phyllis over her shoulder.

Bobby tried once more, but with no better

result; then his feelings got the better of him. “*DARN!*” he shrieked at the top of his lungs, his face distorted with anger. And, for lack of stronger expression, he hurled his pipe to the floor, where it broke into fragments.

“*Bobby Brewster!*” cried the two older girls, aghast; while Sally, roused to attention at last, said, “Now you’ve done it!—Now you can’t blow any more bubbles!”

Bobby regarded his shattered treasure ruefully; then he burst into tears. “Nobody would show me *how*,” he wailed. “An’ I wanted to make a *big* one.”

Hilda put her arms about him. “Don’t cry, Bobsy,” she said, comfortingly, “P’raps Sally will let you use her pipe. Now, you must try again and, this time, remember to blow *very* gently.”

Sally handed over her pipe reluctantly, taking occasion, as she did so, to remark severely, “You don’t deserve to have it, ’cause you said a bad word,—you *swore!*”

Bobby looked uncomfortable. Such conduct

as his certainly called for some sort of explanation.

"That wasn't a swear," he said after a rather weighty silence, "that was on'y just a *p'etend* swear."

But his explanation fell on deaf ears, for Sally had turned her attention to Natalie once more.

"Now *you* blow one, Natalie," she was saying, "an' send it to your mother. Then it can tell her where you are an' she can come an' find you."

Natalie laid down her pipe. "No," she said vehemently, "No—I don't *want* her to find me."

"Why not?"

"Cause she would take me back."

Sally's eyes opened wide. "Why don't you want to go back?" she asked.

"Cause I—I don't have any one to play with."

"What did you do all day?"

"Walked in the park an' fed the squirrels."

"Is that *all*?"

Natalie pondered. "Sometimes went to the beach an' dug in the sand," she said at length.

"But when you were in the park, couldn't you

play around on the grass an' in the bushes, an' have a good time *that way?*"

"No,—I had to be careful not to get my dress dirty."

"O my goodness!" exclaimed Sally with ready sympathy, "I wouldn't like that, either. Carlotta has to keep all dressed up, too. She has to think about her clothes all the time. But Mother lets us wear khaki in the morning; then we can get as dirty as we please. Mother says she likes to see us dirty, 'cause then she knows we've been having a good time."

Their conversation, at this point, was interrupted by loud cries from Bobby. "Lookit!" he squealed, his voice tense with excitement, "Lookit!—quick—quick, eve'ybody,— before it bweakst!"

"O my!" breathed Sally in an awestruck whisper, "it's the biggest one yet. Look, girls! Look at Bob's bubble! Isn't it a *whopper?*!"

"I knew you could do it, Bobs!" cried Hilda.

Bobby's face was radiant with the joy of achievement. "I wish Muvver could see it," he

said wistfully, as they all gazed, spellbound, at the lovely, quivering thing.

"Better let it go, Bobs, or it'll bust," advised Sally.

Bobby flourished his arm, and the bubble floated away,—up, up, up,—dancing, scintillating in the sunlight.

"You didn't say who it was going to," said Natalie in a disappointed tone.

"Say it, quick, Bobs,—quick, before it's gone!" yelled Sally.

"To Jeanie!" cried Bobby, leaning far out and gazing up into the blue, where the bubble was still visible.

For a moment no one spoke. A cloud seemed to have come over the four faces which, until then, had been shining. Natalie looked from one to another in surprise.

"Who's Jeanie?" she asked.

"Uncle Roddy's little girl," answered Sally in a muffled voice. "That's her room where Mother let you sleep last night."

"Where is she?" asked Natalie.

The children turned their heads away. It was plain, none of them wished to answer.

"Where *is* she?" repeated Natalie, with growing impatience.

Bobby laid down his pipe and took a deep breath. "Little Cousin Jeanie," he said, looking about helplessly as if searching for the proper words, "she—she got hurted,—*awful*. An'—an'—an' God took her." He looked at Natalie with wide and solemn eyes.

Sally's chin began to quiver. Hilda's eyes were brimming, and she said in a trembling voice, "But we pretend she's here just the same. Then we don't feel so bad about it."

"She always loved to play hide-and-seek," put in Phyllis. "An' so we make believe she's only hiding from us now. She used to find such ducky hiding-places, didn't she? 'Member the time she crawled 'way under the back steps, and Uncle Roddy had to take a board off to get her out?"

They all laughed at the happy recollection.

"An' sometimes," she continued, "if we sit

and listen *hard*, we're almost *sure* we hear her calling, 'COOP!', the way she used to. Hark! P'raps we can hear her, now."

They shut their eyes, and cupped their hands behind their ears, but the only sound that came to them above the twittering of birds, was the crunch of wheels on the gravel drive. And peeping down from their leafy bower, they saw and recognized a friend.

"It's Amos!" they shrieked, dropping everything and racing down the stairway. "Come on! Let's get some apples for Nellie!"

Natalie, hand in hand with Hilda and Phyllis, was surprised to discover in Amos the strange old man she had met on the Hobbs Hollow road. She felt, now, upon seeing him once more, as if he were, indeed, an old friend; and jumped about and made as much fuss over him and his horse as any of the other children. As for Amos, after looking at her in a puzzled way for a moment, he suddenly gave his thigh a slap and cried in amazement, "Bless my stars! If it ain't little sissy!" And to the children's utter aston-

ishment, he straightway stuck out his tongue at her, laughing heartily as he did so.

Natalie returned his look, gravely,—he certainly was the queerest man she had ever seen,—then, quick as a flash, out came her small red tongue, while her eyes danced with mischief.

"Oh, Natalie, that's not nice at all," said Hilda in a shocked voice.

"It's bad, awful bad," added Bobby in reproving tones.

But Natalie was not squelched. "We *always* stick out our tongues at each other," she explained importantly. "Don't we, Amos?"

"Yes-surree," responded Amos gravely, though his bright blue eyes were twinkling. "Now I come to think of it, ever since I've knowed ye, we been a-doin' it. Yes sir!"

He got down, lumberingly, from his high seat, asking as he looked about him, "Where's your ma?"

"Mother's in the kitchen, canning strawberries," said Phyllis. "I'll go tell her you're here. It won't take me but a minute."

So saying, she ran down the drive towards the rear of the house until she came to the summer-kitchen, through whose open windows came an enticing fruity smell.

"Mother," she called, "Mother, Amos is here. He wants to see you."

Molly came to the door in a blue linen smock, her cheeks as pink as the berries she was canning.

"Good morning, Amos!" she called with a wave of her big wooden spoon. "I'll be with you directly." And in a moment she came out carrying a plate of molasses cookies, fresh from the oven.

"Gussie just baked these. Let's all have some," she said, passing them around.

"Thankye ma'am," said Amos, taking one and biting into it with relish. Then, between munches, he explained his errand.

"I was jest over to Armitage with a load o' cabbages," he said, "an' as I come past the telegraph orfice, Mis' Harmon, the operator, come runnin' out an' hollers at me an' wants to know am I goin' home. I tells her 'Yes', so then she

asts me will I bring you this here telegram, an' save her the bother o' 'phonin'."

He began to search through his numerous pockets with a rather doubtful air, which increased as no telegram was forthcoming.

"Now, where in Sam Hill did I put that thing?" he muttered, scratching his head in perplexity, and going around to the back of his cart to look under some burlap bags he had there. Then, suddenly, a bit of yellow paper protruding from under the battered leather seat-cushion caught his eye, and with a grunt of satisfaction, he pounced upon it eagerly.

"Here 'tis, ma'am," he said, handing it to her.

Molly tore open the envelope with fingers that trembled slightly. Telegrams always made her nervous; but in this instance there was no cause for alarm, and her face brightened as she read the message.

"Oh, children," she cried happily, "it's a radiogram from Uncle Roddy. His ship docks to-morrow. He'll be here Friday afternoon."

"Hooray! Hooray!" they shrieked, dancing

up and down. "Uncle Roddy! Uncle Roddy!
How wonderful to have him home!"

"Will he bwing me a pwersent?" asked Bobby
in an eager voice.

"Oh, Bobby! That's all you think of—
presents!" exclaimed Phyllis in disgust.

"Well, I don't care. I like to get pwersents,"
replied Bobby, unabashed. "An' I like Uncle
Roddy, 'cause he always bwings 'em."

"Shame on you," said Phyllis; while Sally
added with a sanctimonious air, "I'd love Uncle
Roddy if he never brought me *anything*."

"So would I," said Hilda warmly. "I love the
way he always takes our faces between his hands
when he kisses us."

"An' I love the way he sings," added Phyllis.
"When he sings 'Danny Deever', don't it make
us shiver, though?"

"O-o-o-h!" they all quavered, hugging them-
selves delightedly.

"Well I love him 'cause he's my uncle," an-
nounced Sally, in a matter-of-fact manner, as
if there were nothing further to be said.

Phyllis snorted. "I wouldn't care *whose* uncle he was," she retorted, "Carlotta's or—or Maudie May's,—I'd love him just the same."

"If he was Maudie May's uncle, he'd be all brack like Maudie May," observed Bobby, wisely.

"Well, even if he was," replied Phyllis, "he'd be nice, just the same."

And with this, they all scampered off to get some clover for Nellie.

Molly and Amos stood looking after them. "They're a fine bunch, ma'am," said Amos, "a fine bunch. But I didn't rightly sense that the *little* gal belonged here."

"Why,—have you seen her before?" asked Molly quickly.

"Yes ma'am,—over on the Hobbs Holler road, a few days since."

Molly's eyes sparkled. "Tell me about it, Amos," she begged.

Amos scratched his ear meditatively. "Well, let's see, now," he began. "Must ha' been last Monday I seen her. I remember, 'cause that

was the day the 'Yaller Jackets' played the 'Hornets', over to Armitage, an' a grand game it was, ma'am, too. I was drivin' along the Hobbs Holler road, 'bout a mile this side o' where it crosses the road to Oldfield, an' I see this little gal—little sissy, I calls her—a settin' by the roadside. There wa'n't no older folks about, an', thinks I, she's lost, mebbe; though, to tell the truth, ma'am, she seemed as chipper as a lark, not a bit scart, nor nothin'. So I stops an' offers her a lift, but she shakes her head; then I asts her where she lives, an' if she was a-visitin' round about, but she won't give me no answer. An' so I figgers that her folks *must* be somewheres near, so I druv on."

Molly then told him how they had found Natalie on their doorstep Monday night during the big rainstorm, and Amos listened attentively, clucking his tongue against his teeth, from time to time, to show his sympathy.

"Dear me suz," he said, when she had finished, "an' to think I passed her by, an' I could ha' brung her along as well as not, poor little sissy!"

Dear, dear! What will Sabina say?" He paused in dismay at the prospect of his wife's certain disapproval. "An' ye say ye don't know where she lives, nor who her folks are, nor nothin'?" he continued after a short silence.

"No; my husband got all the papers yesterday, thinking he might see some mention of her, and is going to get them again this afternoon. But there was nothing in any of them about either a lost child or a stolen one; and this is the third day. I must confess, I don't understand it at all. It seems almost as if they didn't want her, and yet, it's hard to think that there are such people in the world, Amos."

Amos seemed lost in contemplation of a pair of chipmunks chasing each other around the trunk of a tree near by. "Yes," he answered slowly, "but there's a heap o' mighty strange critters walkin' about the earth that calls theirselves 'umans. I've took notice o' that, ma'am. An' they may have their uses, same as mosquiter an' pole-cats has theirs; but we'd all be jest as happy if they wa'n't here." And having deliv-

ered himself of this speech, he climbed heavily up over the wheel of his cart, and picked up the reins.

"Anybody round here want a ride?" he asked, apparently of the tree-tops, as the children came trooping back with a supply of clover that would have kept Nellie happy for a week.

"Oh, Mother, may we go?" they begged.

"Well, not too far. It's almost lunch time, now, you know."

So, cutting short their attentions to Nellie, whose fat sides were already bulging with their generous donations, they scrambled up into the back of the cart; all but Bobby, who insisted upon going up over the wheel as Amos did, and, with some assistance from Molly, proudly perched himself at Amos's side and, seizing the reins, began to flap them up and down, yelling, "Git-ap, Nellie! Git-ap!"

But Nellie refused to stir. Except for rolling a surprised and inquiring eye over her shoulder to see what sort of strange, boisterous creature was attached to the other end of her reins, she

remained as motionless as the wooden horse in front of the Armitage Hardware Store. Bobby flapped harder and yelled louder, but still she did not budge. Then Amos clucked softly and, at that, she gave a sudden, skittish jump which nearly sent them off their balance, and set them all to squealing. And they clattered away down the drive, with such oft-repeated, shrill good-byes you would have thought their absence was to be measured by months instead of minutes.

When she had waved them out of sight, Molly returned to the kitchen and finished her canning; and when the last rosy jar had been sealed and put in a row with the others on a shelf in the preserve closet, she went in search of Tom, to tell him the news.

She found him in the garden, staking up the cosmos, whose tall, feathery stalks had been pretty well beaten down by Monday's storm.

"What do you think?" she called as she drew near, "Amos has just been telling me that *he* saw Natalie on Monday, over near the road to Oldfield."

"Pretty good detective work, I'll say," was Tom's reply. "I could tell by your walk, when I saw you coming, that there was something in the air."

He left his work, and they sat down together on a little rustic bench under a trellis of honeysuckle. The air about them was fragrant with the scent of the yellow blossoms.

"Oh, but it wasn't that, Tom," responded Molly quickly, "though, to be sure, it *is* good to have Amos's corroboration of our theory. But look! Look what he brought!" And she thrust the telegram into his hand.

As Tom read, it was plain the message pleased him. "Fine!" he cried when he had finished. "Won't it be good to have him back again? I didn't know he was planning to return so soon."

"Neither did I," said Molly, her face lighting up with joyful anticipation; then it grew wistful as she added with an effort, "I do hope it means he is beginning to get over dear little Jean's death." Her voice shook as she spoke the well-loved name, and she continued in a faltering

voice, "It has been so dreadful—all these months—for him to be away off there—alone—with his heartache. I couldn't bear to think of it." Her eyes filled with sudden tears.

"But you must remember that Rod has lots of friends in Paris, dear," said Tom, taking her hand.

"Yes, I know. But that's not like having your own people when you're in trouble," Molly answered. "Of course, now he's interested in writing this play, and that must be a big help; for there's nothing in the world like keeping busy when you're trying to forget."

"It was the wisest thing he could have done," declared Tom, "to get away from all this into a new environment. Here, everything reminded him of *her*."

"That's true," agreed Molly sadly, and for a few moments, silence fell between them.

"Poor boy," she murmured presently, almost as if speaking to herself, "it's going to be so hard for him to come back and not find her watching for him at the window. She *did* adore her daddy

so!—Sometimes I think if she had died of an illness, he might not have taken it so hard. But, even though it was no fault of his, he will never cease to blame himself for her death, since he was driving the car when the accident occurred. If only Ann could have lived!” she cried, trying to blink back her tears, “but for him to lose her when Jeanie came, and then to lose Jean like this! Oh, it’s too hard,—too hard!” She fell to weeping quietly.

“Yes, it *is* hard,” said Tom with a deep breath.
“His one ewe lamb.”

Molly pressed her hand against her lips to stop their trembling before she continued, “I shall never forget the look on his face when he said to me,—‘I’ve *killed* her!’ Sometimes in the night I wake up and—and *see* it.”

Tom’s arm was around her in an instant. “Dear heart,” he whispered, “we *all* loved her. She was like one of our very own.”

After a moment, Molly sat up straight and mopped her eyes. “I’m so in hopes this play he’s writing may be a success,” she said. “He

seems so wrapped up in it that if it *should* be, it might give him a fresh interest in life."

"I have great faith in Rod's ability," responded Tom, heartily. "Anything he puts his heart into is bound to succeed."

Molly started to reply, but at this point, their conversation was interrupted by loud shouts for "Mother!"

"That sounds like our roughneck crew," remarked Tom, gazing in the direction whence the sounds arose. "Yes, here they come! Let's hide!"

"Let's!" cried Molly gaily; and as the shouts drew nearer, they vanished into the shrubbery.

It was Bobby who finally discovered their hiding-place and, crowing triumphantly, dragged them forth. Then they all stretched themselves full-length upon the grass under the grape-arbor, while the children recounted the incidents of their trip with Amos.

"When I get to be a big man," said Bobby in conclusion, "I'm goin' to be just like Amos, an' have a horse like Nellie."

Phyllis burst out laughing. "Oh, Bobs," she gurgled, "won't you look funny with a long, gray beard!"

Bobby felt of his chin reflectively, as if, already, he could feel the whiskers sprouting. "Amos don't look funny," he said, "an' he's the nicest man in the whole world."

"'Cept Uncle Roddy," put in Sally.

"An' Father," added loyal Hilda.

Tom bowed with mock solemnity. "Thank you," he said, "thank you, ladies. I appreciate the honor of being included in the illustrious triumvirate."

The children looked at each other sheepishly, not fully understanding what he meant.

"I don't know what that is," said Bobby. "You say it for us, Muvver."

But Molly jumped to her feet, laughing. "Don't mind him, dears," she cried, "he's only trying to be funny!"

CHAPTER VII

OVER AT CARLOTTA'S

WHILE they were at lunch a half-hour later, Molly was called to the telephone and, after a rather lengthy conversation, announced as she reseated herself at the table, that Mrs. Smith had invited the children to come over that afternoon to play with Carlotta.

"Oh, good!" they cried, entranced with the idea. "Can we go right after lunch?"

"I think it would be better to wait till about three," said Molly. "That will give Bob and Natalie time for their naps; and it's so warm that you older children might lie down for a little while, also. I'll read to you, if you like. Perhaps we can finish 'The Prince and the Pauper'."

All agreed that this would be a satisfactory arrangement; so when lunch was over, they went upstairs to their big, airy bedroom, dim and cool

with its close-drawn shades; and getting into their nightclothes, the older children stretched themselves on quilts upon the floor, while the two little ones were put to bed. Then Molly, looking scarcely more than a child, herself, in her dainty negligee, with her hair in two long braids, curled up on a chaise-longue near one of the open windows, and for an hour or more read aloud, while the younger ones, soothed by the pleasant sound of her voice, slumbered peacefully, and the older ones listened, spellbound, to the story of the romantic career of a certain Tom Canty of Offal Court.

Next came baths, after which they were all freshly dressed in white, even Natalie, for Molly had resurrected an outgrown frock of Sally's which, with a tuck or two, just fitted her.

"Doesn't she look adorable, Mother?" cried Phyllis, when her toilet was completed; and Hilda, throwing both arms about the little girl, exclaimed impulsively, "Oh, Natalie, I wish you were our own, *own* little sister."

"I am," Natalie replied, her chubby arms

clasping Hilda's neck, "an' you are *my* sister, an' so is Sally, an' Phyllis, too."

"An' *me*," put in Bobby, pushing himself in amongst them. "Me, too, Natty." Whereat they all laughed loudly, calling him a "little girly-girl," an epithet to which he strenuously objected.

Then Father called up to ask if they were ready to start; so they all ran downstairs, chattering like magpies, and piled into the car and were driven away.

Carlotta was waiting for them on the steps, dancing up and down with impatience; and as soon as they alighted, she conducted them to the sun-parlor, where her mother was waiting to receive them. After their greetings were over, Mrs. Smith fixed her eyes upon Natalie with undisguised interest. Ever since her telephone conversation with Molly that morning, she had been consumed with curiosity to see what the child was like.

"So this is the little girl!" she remarked, looking her over so critically that, young as she was,

Natalie felt decidedly uncomfortable. She tried to get behind Hilda, away from those dreadful, searching eyes.

"She's a pretty little thing," continued Mrs. Smith, turning to Tom and speaking quite as if Natalie were not present, "and I can understand why Mrs. Brewster would hesitate about turning her over to the authorities. But—" she lowered her voice discreetly,—“do you think it quite *wise*, Mr. Brewster, to let her associate so freely with your children? After all, you know nothing whatever about her.”

Tom threw back his head and laughed. “Why, you have only to look at her, Mrs. Smith,—” he began, but that lady, somewhat nettled by his laughter, cut him short.

“Oh, she *looks* harmless enough, I admit, but you never can tell! Now, if it were *my* kiddy who was to be thrown with her so intimately, I should feel that I must be careful, *very* careful. They're so impressionable, you know. Of course I don't want you to think I mind her coming here this afternoon,—that's quite all right,

I assure you; but you must admit it is extremely *odd*, her coming to you as she did and on such a dreadful night. Has it ever occurred to you that she might have been—ah—*planted?*"

Tom looked completely mystified. "Planted?" he echoed blankly.

"Yes," said Mrs. Smith. "One reads so much in the papers nowadays about these society burglars; and it's a well-known fact that they'll go to almost *any* lengths to gain admittance to a house. This child is plenty big enough to slip down at night and unfasten a door or a window. Now, if she had come *here*, I must confess, I should feel decidedly uneasy." Her glance wandered complacently over the formal elegance surrounding her. Mrs. Smith's house always reminded Tom of the model rooms displayed in a department store. He found himself half expecting to discover price-tags dangling from the backs of the furniture.

"You think, then, that she's a little female 'Oliver Twist'?" he asked. "No, Mrs. Smith, such an idea never occurred to either of us.

And, even if it had, we have nothing, aside from a few antiques which it would be rather difficult to remove, that is of any particular value, except, of course, the children."

He spoke banteringly, but there was a tender light in his eyes as they rested upon the sturdy little figures trudging away in Carlotta's wake.

First of all, the children insisted that Natalie must be shown the wonders of Carlotta's home; so, accordingly, a tour of the place was begun. The formal gardens, the goldfish pool, the kennels for Mrs. Smith's prize Pekingese pups, the billiard room with its fascinating racks of gaily-colored balls, the suit of armor in the entrance hall, the small self-running elevator, each, in turn, received its toll of admiration. Then Bobby said, "Now show her the poor dead cow."

Carlotta looked puzzled. "Dead cow!" she exclaimed, "we haven't any dead cow, Bobby."

"Yes, you have," responded that young gentleman. "Don't you remember? 'Way up high, on the wall."

"He means the bison's head," explained Phyl-

lis, "over the fireplace in your father's smoking-room."

"O my goodness!" giggled Carlotta. "I never would have thought of that. All right, come on. We'll all go look at it." And taking Natalie by the hand, she led them thither.

It was an awesome sight, that splendid shaggy head so far above them, and they gazed at it in morbid and depressing silence. Then Bobby, getting down on his stomach, wriggled his way into the fireplace and stared intently up the flue.

"What *are* you looking at, Bobs?" asked Carlotta.

"I want to see his legs," said Bobby without moving.

"Oh, Bobby!" shrieked Carlotta, "he hasn't got any legs!"

Bobby withdrew his head at once and sat up. "But how could he walk?" he asked.

"Well, I s'pose he had some legs once, but after they killed him they cut off his head, an'—an'—so he hasn't got any, any more," explained Carlotta.

Bobby's mouth drooped. "Poor cow!" he mourned, looking at it pityingly. "Poor old cow! Did a bad man cut off you's head an' frow you's legs away?" His eyes filled suddenly with tears.

"Come on," said Phyllis, "let's not stay here. It makes *me* feel kind of creepy, too. I hate to see things that have really been alive an' happy, made into just—just *ornaments*. Don't you, Carlotta?"

"Ye-e-e-s," replied Carlotta slowly. It was plain she had never given the subject any serious thought. "Daddy's *awful* proud of it, though," she added after a moment. "He likes to tell people how he shot it."

Having now exhausted all the attractions the big house had to offer, the children went out-of-doors, and, for lack of any immediate pastime, seated themselves in a stiff little semicircle about one of the beds of cannas which adorned the lawn; all, that is, except Bobby, who promptly threw himself flat down upon the soft, closely cropped turf, and began to roll about, yelling

at the top of his lungs, "I'm a steam-woller. Look out! I'm comin'!"

"I wish our grass was nice like this," said Sally, rubbing a caressing hand across its velvety surface. "Ours is all rough and full of humps, even when it's just been cut."

"*I like* our grass," replied Hilda, clasping her arms about her bended knees in a favorite attitude. "I like to lie down on it, on my face, an' try to imagine how it would look to me if I were a tiny fairy."

The others drew closer, in rapt anticipation, and she continued: "The little humps would be like mountains, and the big, coarse grass, like trees. Think what a forest our front lawn would be!—And what a place to play hide-and-seek! Then there's that little mossy place down by the roots of the old white birch in the front yard. Remember it?"

They all nodded solemnly.

"Well, that's the fairies' ball-room! The grass around it shelters it, and the little fireflies light it, and they can dance all night without

anybody seeing them. Sometimes, just before dark, I steal down there, softly, and tie some of the longest blades of grass together, so as to make swings for them. You know they like to play the same as children do. And after I'm in bed at night, an' all the lights are out, I listen hard, an' then I hear the sweetest, softest little laughing voices, an' it makes me happy, 'cause I think, maybe they're swinging in the little fairy swings."

The children sat like images, their eyes on Hilda's face. When she finished, Carlotta cast a wistful glance about the well-kept lawn. "O dear," she sighed, "I don't s'pose the fairies *ever* come here. They couldn't have fun like over in your yard."

"I tell you what!" Phyllis face was glowing. "Let's build Carlotta a grotto like the one Mother made on Hilda's birthday. The fairies would *love* that."

"Oh, Carlotta!" cried Hilda rapturously, "it was *beautiful!* She took big, flat stones and built a little curving wall, and then filled in the

space with moss and ferns, and put a piece of looking-glass in for a lake. And when it got dark, she set little candles all about in the moss and lighted them. Oh, Carlotta, I *wish* you could have seen it!"

"Well, we'll make her one right now," said Phyllis, scrambling to her feet and beginning to search about in a very businesslike manner. "Come on, kids, get all the big, flat stones you can find!"

But here they met defeat; for the grassy carpet was as barren of stones as a real one would have been; and, look as they might, that emerald expanse yielded no stick nor bit of fairy moss. The children were disheartened.

"O dear," grumbled Phyllis, sprawling full-length on the grass with her head in her hands, "there doesn't seem to be anything to make it out of."

"No, there doesn't," was Carlotta's disconsolate reply. "Over here there isn't anything to make *anything* out of. It's too picked-up."

"It isn't meant for a play place," said Sally.

"Well, I guess we may as well give it up," said Hilda, resignedly.

"Then what *shall* we do?" they asked each other in despair.

"Let's play 'Hare and hounds,'" suggested Sally.

"There aren't any good places for the hares to hide," returned Phyllis, looking at the big, open spaces of lawn on every side.

"But there are dandy places to lay the trail," answered Sally. "Got any newspapers we can tear up, Carlotta?"

Carlotta jumped to her feet. "I'll go ask Stella," she said. "I know she'll let me have some." And she vanished round the side of the house.

A few moments later, she reappeared, all smiles, with her arms full of papers. "Let's take 'em into the summer-house," she called. "It's so hot out there in the sun."

So to the summer-house they went, and were soon hard at work reducing the news sheets to the smallest of scraps. This was a task which all

could share in, and, consequently, was completed in short order. Then they drew lots to determine which of them were to be the hares and which the hounds; and thus it came about that Hilda, Sally, and Carlotta started out to lay the trail, while Phyllis, Natalie, and Bob remained behind.

Phyllis sat down on the floor, and pulled the little ones' heads into her lap. "Now, shut your eyes tight," she said, "and don't you *dare* peek till I count a hundred. That'll give the others a good start; then we'll see if we can catch 'em." And shutting her own eyes, she began to count slowly, while the hares, without more ado, scuttled away as fast as their legs would carry them, their skirts caught up in front like bags to carry the bits of torn paper which were to be the means of tracing them.

Scattering this lavishly in a crazy zigzag trail of white they ran first out and around the garage at the very rear of the grounds, then back towards the house again by way of the flower garden. They circled the goldfish pool and went

on through the pergola and down the brick-paved walk to the sundial; on past the kitchen annex and the latticed drying-yard; past the sun-parlor and the massive porte-cochère. Beyond lay only the open lawn; and as the panting hares reached this, they heard Phyllis's shrill cry: "One hundred!—Coming, ready or *not!*!" and knew that the chase was on.

A little breeze had sprung up, and this began to scatter the papers as fast as they were dropped, so that no definite trail remained, and the yard began to look as if an errant snowstorm had struck it.

"O goodness, my papers are all gone!" cried Hilda in consternation. "And I hear them coming, too. Quick,—we must hide!" And with utter disregard of consequences, they all dived headfirst into a convenient clump of bushes.

"Ouch!" squealed Carlotta, "these are barberry bushes! I'm all scratched up!"

"So'm I," said Hilda, pulling a pricker out of her thumb. "But we don't dast move now. Here they come!"

"I'm afraid they'll see our white dresses," whispered Sally, as she cowered behind a bush.

The shouts of the pursuers were drawing nearer every minute, and soon the pack in full cry came around the corner of the house. But these three hares were never destined to be caught, for at that moment an upper window was thrown violently open and Mrs. Smith leaned out.

"Carlotta!" she screamed, her face crimson with anger, "what *are* you doing? What do you *mean* by scattering papers all over the lawn like that! Pick them up immediately! You're old enough to know better than to be up to such tricks! I'm perfectly *ashamed* of you! Haven't you got enough *playthings* that you must ruin the looks of the place like this? Now, don't stand there looking at me, pick them up *at once!* Suppose somebody should come to call!"

With her first words, the poor little hares had come creeping out from under cover and stood looking at her miserably; while the hounds

ceased their chase and drooped in shamed surprise. "Suppose somebody *should* come to call?" they were thinking, "Well, what of it? What difference would that make?"

"We're awfully sorry, Mrs. Smith," began Hilda, apologetically; but Mrs. Smith interrupted her. "You know very well, you're *not!*!" she cried, and slammed down the window.

Carlotta flushed and bit her lip. "She's cross to-day," she whispered to Hilda, "but, you know —*sometimes*—she's real pleasant."

Hilda slid her arm about her waist. "Don't you mind, Carlotta," she whispered in reply, "'cause *we* don't, not a bit."

Phyllis, who stood kicking at the turf with the toe of her shoe, looked up brightly, and exclaimed, "I tell you what let's do! Let's have a race and see who can pick up the most."

"Let's!" They accepted the suggestion with delight, and soon forgot the unpleasant scene in the mad hilarity of competition. And a half-hour later, when the old "Packarderm," as Father facetiously called their old grey Pack-

ard car, came rolling up the drive, they did not want to leave.

"Just a little longer, *please!*" they begged. But Father would not listen. "No, Mother says you must come home. It's nearly supper time," he said.

So they bade good-bye to Mrs. Smith with no outward show of resentment, and kissed Carlotta lovingly, begging her to come to see them soon.

Then Father chimed in. "Oh, yes, Mrs. Smith, my wife wanted me to be sure to ask if you and Carlotta could come over to tea to-morrow afternoon. I believe she is planning to have one or two tables of bridge."

"Oh, good!" cried the children, their faces shining.

Mrs. Smith's eyes narrowed. "Why, yes," she replied somewhat condescendingly, "I think I can come; but, I'm not so *sure* about Carlotta. I'm afraid she overtired herself to-day."

There was a dead silence, as, with downcast

faces, the children took their places in the car.

"I wonder what's up," mused Father. "Whatever it is, it's bound to come out sooner or later."

And they drove away.

"Have a good time?" he ventured presently, glancing around at them.

"Wonderful!" was the unanimous reply; then silence settled down once more.

Suddenly Phyllis spoke. "You don't 'spose she'll make Carlotta stay in to-morrow, do you?" she asked.

"Oh, she couldn't be as mean as that!" cried Hilda, aghast at the suggestion.

"How could anybody be mean to Carlotta, she's such a *dear*," added Sally, adoringly. "Didn't you *love* her, Natalie?"

"Yes," answered Natalie, "I like Carlotty, but I think her mother's *awful* cross."

"Old crosspatch!" came an emphatic echo from the corner where Bobby sat.

And then the whole story came out.

"We didn't *mean* to be bad, Father," explained

Phyllis. "And we picked up every teeny-weeny scrap; but she acted just as if we had done something *awful*."

"An' when Hilda tried to be polite and 'pologize, she just slammed down the window an' wouldn't listen," said Sally.

"Poor Carlotta, she felt so 'shamed, she almost cried, Father," mourned Hilda.

"Well, Mrs. Smith takes such pride in the looks of her place that I suppose it *did* upset her when she saw what you wild Indians had done to it," said Father, his lips twitching.

"But we didn't *hurt* anything," said Hilda.

Phyllis began to giggle quietly. "Oh, yes we did," she declared. "We hurt Mrs. Smith's feelings."

And so the discussion ended in a laugh.

"Well maybe Carlotta's house is nicer than ours," observed Sally as they came in sight of home, "but I know *one* thing; her mother isn't."

"Oh, *nobody* is so nice as Mother!" they all cried as they spied her watching for them at the gate.

CHAPTER VIII

TEMPEST AND SUNSHINE

THERE was great excitement next morning; Tricksy's puppies had arrived in the night. But, sad to relate, instead of making use of the place so carefully prepared and set apart for her, she had chosen to cradle them in a box in the broom closet under the kitchen stairs. Gussie was quite cross about it.

"Oh, the teeny-weeny darling things!" cried the children, inspecting the new arrivals with delight. If, in the midst of their rejoicing there was disappointment that no one of them resembled the adored Rinty, they did not show it, but welcomed the little squirming, rat-like creatures with enthusiastic approval. Even Tricksy, herself, proud mother though she was, did not display more thorough satisfaction.

"How many are there?" asked Sally, her bright little face alight with interest as she knelt beside the box and peered into it.

"Only three." It was Hilda who answered; and her voice sounded conscience-stricken. "Oh, Phyll," she said miserably, "p'raps we should have made more bassinets. Poor Tricksy prob'ly thought there wouldn't be room for more than three."

"Well, it's too late now," responded Phyllis, philosophically. "We can own 'em all together, since there isn't one apiece. Oh, see the darling one with the black spot on its tail! Look, Natalie! Don't you *love* him?"

"You isn't plannin' fo' to *keep* all of 'em, is you?" demanded Gussie, pausing in the midst of her breakfast dishes to regard the excited children with frank disapproval.

"*Keep* them?" they echoed blankly, returning her look with utter astonishment. "Why, of course! What *would* we do with them?"

"*Drown* 'em!" Gussie fairly spat out the words, adding emphasis to her reply, if that were

necessary, by the slam of the dish-cupboard door.

The children jumped to their feet. "What!" they shrieked. "Drown Tricksy's puppies?"

They gazed at Gussie, open-mouthed, as though fearing that she had suddenly gone mad. How could they know that her ill-temper was due, in a large measure, to a sleepless night of worry over her shiftless, drunken son?

Gussie faced them angrily, her hands on her ample hips. "Dat's what I said, an' dat's what I mean!" she replied with ominous finality. "I ain't a-goin' to have all dem mutts roun' heah unner mah feets, an' I tells you dat, flat! One you can keep; de odders has to go!" And having delivered these dreadful words, she turned once more to her dishes.

There was a dead silence for a moment, while the children stood as if paralyzed, their eyes wide with horror and disbelief. Then Phyllis found her voice. "You're a bad wicked woman!" she declared, stamping her foot, "an' you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" While

Sally, with one indignant look at Gussie's hostile back, dashed, screaming, from the room.

"I'm going to tell Mother! I'm going to tell Mother! I'm going to tell Mother!" she repeated in a sing-song voice, somewhat tremulous with anxiety.

Then Hilda tried to smooth the matter over by saying, soothingly, "Don't be silly, Phyllis. Gussie doesn't mean that, not *really*."

"Deed I does!" Gussie wheeled sharply about and spoke in a loud, angry voice. "You tell you Pa ef he don't drown dem dawgs, I do it *myse'f*. I got 'nough troubles, 'out havin' dem messin' roun'."

By this time Phyllis was trembling with anger, while the other three, stunned to speechlessness, took refuge behind her. "You lay one finger on those puppies, Gussie Johnson," she said tensely, "and I'll—I'll—" she broke off, breathless, incoherent, choking; and Bobby valiantly took up the cudgels.

Stepping close up to Gussie, he menaced her with one chubby fore-finger. "You—you—

you—" he stammered excitedly, "you touch 'em, an' I'll—I'll *bite* you, Gussie, I will."

"An' I'll get a p'liceman an' have you 'rested an' sent to prison," was Natalie's dire threat.

"Huh!" grunted Gussie, contemptuously, swishing her dish-water with angry vigor.

Fortunately for all concerned, Molly appeared in the doorway at this instant, with Sally following close behind.

"Well, well!" she exclaimed at sight of their angry faces. "What a lot of cross-looking people! And what's this about poor little Tricksy?"

They hurled themselves upon her with a babel of explanations. "Tricksy . . . the puppies . . . Father . . . Gussie . . . drown. . . ."

In stolid silence, Gussie listened, her face a mask of sullen indifference. Molly put both hands over her ears. "I can't understand when you all talk at once," she said, readily sensing the drift of things. "And before you try to tell me what's happened, let's move Tricksy out to the garage. That'll be the best place for her

for a few days. I know Gussie doesn't want her here, and I don't blame her. She'd be terribly in the way. Come, we'll fix a nice place for her and then get Father to carry out her box."

"But, Mother," they protested, almost in tears, "the playroom—the bassinets—"

"Yes, yes, I know," she answered gently, opening the outer door and beckoning them to follow. "But those must wait until the puppies are older. They're too little to sleep alone, yet, you know, Tricksy wants them in the box with her."

Reluctantly they went with her down the drive towards the garage, with many a lingering, backward look.

"You're sure, Mother, that Gussie won't do anything to 'em while we're gone?" asked Sally.

"Sure? Why, of course, dear," answered Molly confidently. "Don't you know Gussie is too tender-hearted to harm those little, helpless things?"

"But she *said* she would," protested Sally, while the others nodded confirmation.

"Gussie's feeling cross this morning," said

Molly, "and we're all apt to say more than we mean when we feel that way. In a few days she'll be as crazy about the puppies as we are. Wait and see."

So, comforted, and with their confidence in Gussie re-established, they skipped along at Molly's side, chattering merrily.

"I knew Gussie was cross when I got up this morning," said Phyllis. "I could hear her singing 'The Storm of Life' while I was getting dressed. I wonder why she always sings that when she's feeling cranky. Do you s'pose it helps her to get over her crossness?"

"It's so sad-sounding I should think it would make her feel a whole lot worse," observed Sally.

"When Gussie sings that way, I always feel bad, *here*." Bobby laid his hand in the region of his fat stomach, as he spoke, and sighed deeply.

"Poor Gussie, she has her troubles. We must all be kind to her," said Molly, as a plaintive melody floated out across the yard from the open kitchen windows. Though the distance

was too great to catch the words, they all knew them well:

“When the storm of life are raging, hide Thou me,
When the storm of life are raging, hide Thou me.
In the sight of Jordan billow,
Let Thy bosom be my pillow,
Hide me, O Thou rock of ages,
Safe in Thee.”

Ill-temper was a thing of such rare occurrence in Gussie’s case, that Molly resolved she must make an effort to discover the reason for this outburst at an early opportunity. Meanwhile, the song continued its mournful refrain:

“Until the storm of life is pass, hide Thou me,
Until the storm of life is pass, hide Thou me,
In the sight of Jordan billow,
Let Thy bosom be my pillow,
Hide me, O Thou rock of ages,
Safe in Thee.”

“Mother, why does Gussie like that song so much?” asked Hilda.

“I don’t know. I suppose it’s a sort of outlet

for her feelings when she's upset about something."

"Same as when we cry?"

"Exactly."

"Poor Gussie!" Phyllis's tone was genuinely remorseful as she turned and faced them with an almost tragic air. "She must feel just *terrible* about something, an' I was so cross to her."

"But she *was* horrid about the puppies," Sally remarked gravely.

Then Molly opened the garage door and they all swarmed in.

The "garage," so called from the fact that it was the home of their dingy "Packarderm," was no more nor less than a roomy old barn, which, in the days before they owned the place, had served as shelter for numerous cows, horses, and articles of farm equipment.

The children set to work upon it, now, with brooms and pails of water, and soon had one of the stalls in what they considered a suitable condition of cleanliness to receive the new little family. Then, with fresh straw and some old

quilts, they made the place comfortable so that, a few minutes later, when Tom appeared with the box in his arms, everything was ready.

As soon as the box was set down, Tricksy hopped out and began to sniff curiously about her new quarters; and having assured her little dog mind that everything was quite all right, she got back into the box and settled down quietly with her babies once more.

"I think she's going to like it, here, don't you?"
Molly asked the children.

"If she only isn't lonely," said Hilda, doubtfully.

"She's got the puppies for company," remarked Phyllis.

"But that's not like *us*," said Hilda. "They can't talk."

"She'll be all right," Tom assured her. "It's quiet here, and she has everything she needs except a pan of water; and I guess Bobs can run back to the house and get that."

"Sure," replied that young man, proud to have been singled out for this important mission. He

hustled away as fast as his fat legs would carry him; but in a few minutes they saw him coming slowly back with a pail in each hand; one containing water, and the other something which was steaming hot.

"Why, what's this?" asked Molly as she relieved him of his burden.

"Soup," he gasped, all out of breath with his exertions. "Gussie said Twicksy must have some warm food."

Molly and the little girls exchanged glances which said as plainly as any words, "Ah, ha! Gussie has had a change of heart already!"

"I guess she's sorry she was so cross," Hilda remarked with a happy laugh.

"I guess we all are," Phillis replied thoughtfully. "An' I think it would be nice to ask Maudie May over to play with us this afternoon while Carlotta is here. That'll show Gussie we aren't mad at *her* any more, and it'll make her happy, an' then, maybe she'll stop singing '*The Storm of Life*'."

"Oh, ask her then, by all means," cried Tom.

"Anything to give us a rest from that hymn!
I'm getting decidedly fed up on it."

They turned their steps slowly in the direction of the house once more, and had almost reached it when they were startled by a series of ear-piercing screams coming from the direction of the garage.

Molly turned pale. "It's Bobby!" she whispered, clutching Tom by the arm. "I thought he was with us. O dear!—what can have happened?"

Visions of broken arms and legs rose before their eyes as they raced back along the drive, Tom, with his long legs, easily outdistancing them all.

"Don't worry, dear," he called back over his shoulder. "He sounds to me more scared than hurt."

A moment later he shouted, "He's all right!"

"Thank God!" breathed Molly weakly, slackening her pace; for between fright and the exertion of running, she was pretty well winded.

But when she came in sight of the garage, and

the beloved little khaki-clad form, she ran to him with outstretched, trembling arms.

"What is it darling?" she cried. "Are you hurt?—Tell Mother,—quick!" She held him off, feeling his arms, his legs, his sturdy little body for possible injuries. But he could only sob and cling to her, too overcome for words.

"Can't you tell us, darling?" she persisted.

"Maybe a bee stung him," suggested Sally.

Bobby shook his head. "I feel," he said, turning a sickly white, "as if I was goin' to frow up." And, forthwith he proceeded to do so.

"Poor little soul," said Molly as, this deed accomplished, he drooped limply against her shoulder. "Something dreadful must have happened to upset him so. I wish we could find out what it was."

Bobby burrowed his face into her neck. "Twicksy," he moaned in a weak voice, "she's—she's eatin' the p-puppies!"

Tom gave a horrified exclamation, and promptly vanished into the garage, while the little girls began to cry. But a moment later

their fears were dispelled by the sound of his hearty laughter.

"Just look here," he called. "Come quietly, you needn't be afraid. It's all right; but I don't wonder poor little Bobs was scared."

Even with these reassurances, they were almost afraid to look as they stole softly into the great, dim place. When at length they did, however, and warily followed the direction of his pointing finger, they discovered Tricksy crouching in the shadow of the old Packarderm with something—something that *moved*—dangling from her mouth. They looked closer.

"What's she found?" asked Natalie.

"Why," exclaimed Sally, "it's one of the puppies!"

At sight of her Bobby's tears broke out afresh. "See?" he quavered, hiding his face again, "I told you!"

"But, darling," said Molly, kissing him, "she isn't eating the puppy nor even hurting it. That's the way she carries them. See how gentle she is? It doesn't hurt at all. But, O dear!

I'm afraid she's trying to take them back to the kitchen. We must fasten the garage door."

So back into the stall they put Tricksy and the puppy, relief from their recent fright making them almost hysterical as they conveyed her there and, this time, locked her in.

"O my goodness!" exclaimed Phyllis, sinking down on the grass by the side of the drive, "I can't stand many more frights like that!"

Meanwhile, Molly and Hilda, arm in arm, were strolling slowly towards the house, while Tom lingered behind to shake down a few pears from one of his trees, for the other children who were clamoring for them.

"Mother," said Hilda presently, "doesn't it seem kind of sad to lock poor Tricksy in when she wants to be with us so much?"

"It's best for a while, dear," answered Molly. "When she once gets used to it, she won't mind at all."

But Tricksy was of a different opinion; and being a determined little dog, had fully decided that a garage was no fit place in which to rear

her newly acquired family. "Where there's a will, there's a way," was her motto, and inside of an hour, she had taken steps to prove the truth of it. For, presently, loud exclamations from the kitchen drew the family thither; and there, in the corner of the broom closet where they had first seen the light of day, lay the three puppies, while Tricksy standing near, wagged her stumpy tail in triumph.

"Why, how did she get out?" asked Molly in bewilderment. "Did any of you children unlock the door?"

There was a chorus of denials. Then Gus-sie, slapping her wide hips, rocked to-and-fro in glee.

"Dat Tricksy suah is a wise dawg!" she declared without a trace of her former animosity. "De minute she see my back is turn, in she bring dose pups. She bring in one, den I follers her to see how she done it. She got froo a little do' in de back o' de stall, an' she wuk mighty hard, I tell *you!* But she gits 'em all in at las'. She's de perseverin'est dawg I ebber *did* see, an' I 'clare

to goodness, I ain't got de heart to sen' her back. Jes' look at 'er, now, standin' there laughin' at us,—laughin' fit to bust!"

"Oh, Gussie, you *do* love them, don't you?" Hilda threw both arms about Gussie's wide waist, as she spoke, and gave her a hearty squeeze. But before Gussie could reply, there was a wild stampede in her direction. Four pairs of hands clutched her voluminous gingham skirts, and four pairs of arms strove to encircle her stout form. In her delight, she laughed and scolded alternately.

"Hi, now—you git out, you chilluns! Le' me be, I say!—How I gwine git mah wuk done, less you quit your foolin'? Hi-yi? You Bobby, stop a-ticklin' me! I'll git de rollin'-pin! You bet-tah watch out! Git, now, dere's company comin' dis afternoon, I ain't got no time foh dese yere ructions!"

Molly drew close to Tom. "I guess this will put the quietus on 'The Storm of Life' for *today*, at any rate," she said.

CHAPTER IX

MOLLY ENTERTAINS

MOLLY BREWSTER stood in the center of her big bright living-room and looked about it with critical eyes. The hour for her guests to arrive was drawing near, and she was anxious that everything should be in readiness for them. Humming softly to herself, she flitted about, straightening a picture here, re-arranging a vase of flowers there, and plumping up the sofa cushions. The room was charming, and she knew it. From the fine old family portraits above the mantel to the glowing bowl of zinnias on the gate-leg table in the corner, there was no jarring note; the atmosphere was one of simple harmony.

She crossed the room to the alcove where the tea table was set, and paused to regard it with a thoughtful air. Even the most critical of guests

could not fail to admire her eggshell china and her antique silver tea set, she decided.

"It may not be up to the minute in every detail, as Mrs. Smith's would be," she soliloquized, "but it's dainty and in good taste, at any rate."

The same might well have been said of her, as she stood there, very slim and girlish, in her frock of soft pink crêpe, with the lustre of old mahogany about her.

The clock on the landing boomed the hour sonorously, ONE—TWO—THREE; and, with a last satisfied glance about her, Molly started in search of the children who, dressed in their best, had been ready and waiting for a good half-hour for the arrival of their beloved Carlotta.

The sound of voices drew her to the front porch, and there she found the six of them—for Maudie May had gleefully accepted their rather tardy invitation—a tense, expectant row on the top step.

Their long-drawn, admiring "O-o-oh!" at sight of her was as pretty a compliment as any one could wish.

"You look *beautiful*, Mother," cried Sally, "beautiful as—as a queen!"

Phyllis laughed derisively. "Queens aren't beautiful," she said, "not *always*, anyway."

Sally flushed. "They are *so*," she retorted vehemently, "aren't they, Hilda?"

Hilda, thus appealed to, looked uncomfortable. Of all things, she hated to be drawn into an argument, and fought shy of one whenever possible.

"Queen Marie is beautiful," was her indirect reply.

"That's only *one*," argued Phyllis. "I'll bet you can't name any others. Look at Queen Victoria; she was awful fat an' homely."

"Why, Phyllis Brewster, she was *not!*!" exclaimed Sally, shocked and indignant. "I've seen her picture lots of times, an' she's just *beautiful*. She wears a crown an' jewels, an' lovely traily dresses—"

"I'm not talking about her clothes," said Phyllis, obstinately, "I'm talking about *her*, an' she *is* fat, an' homely, too."

"She isn't!"

"She is *so!*!"

"She isn't, she isn't, she *isn't!*!" screamed Sally, her face growing redder every minute.

Phyllis suddenly seemed moved to a sort of impish glee. She began to laugh in a very aggravating way.

"Fat an' homely, fat an' homely, fat an' homely," she chanted teasingly.

"Beautiful, be-autiful, *be-eau-tiful!*!" sang Sally with her fingers in her ears.

"Fat an' home'y, fat an' home'y, fat an' home'y!" mimicked Bobby, joining his voice to the taunting rhythm of Phyllis's.

Molly decided it was time to interfere. "It's three o'clock, they ought to be here soon," she said.

"Good! I hope Carlotta gets here first!" cried Sally, happy at the thought of soon beholding her idol.

"Good, good, good," yelled Bobby, bouncing up and down like an animated rubber ball. "Then we can show her the puppies!"

"Let me show 'em to her first," begged Natalie.

"No—me," replied Bobby firmly.

"I tell you what," said Phyllis, "let's play a joke on her. We'll make her shut her eyes and hold out her hand, an' then we'll put one of the puppies into it an' see if she can guess what it is."

"She might be scared an' drop it," objected Hilda.

"Well, we won't take it out of the box, then," said Phyllis. "We'll just let her put her hand on it, an' then try to guess."

And so it was settled.

"Don't you tell her anything about 'em, Bobs," cautioned Hilda, "don't even *hint*." For as they all knew, Bobs had a weakness for "letting the cat out of the bag."

No doubt there would have been angry words, for Bobs resented Hilda's remark, but just at that moment, the Smiths' handsome limousine came purring up the drive.

"Hush, everybody, here she comes!" cried Phyllis.

"Hooray! Hooray!" they yelled, bounding

to their feet and waving an excited welcome. But no answering wave came from the big car, and as it stopped at the door and Molly ran down the steps to meet it, no bright child-face peered out from its shadowy interior.

"Why, where's Carlotta?" asked Molly in dismay. "Oh, Mrs. Smith, I hope she isn't sick. We've been counting on her so."

Mrs. Smith, resplendent in orchid chiffon, stepped majestically down from the cushioned seat, and shook out her skirts with tantalizing deliberation. Then she held out her hand to Molly.

"How do you do, Mrs. Brewster," she said with a half-amused glance at the children as they all pressed close for news of their favorite.

"No Carlotta isn't sick, though it really is a wonder she *isn't*. She's so unused to *romping*, you know. But it seemed best that she should stay at home this afternoon. I'm sorry if it disappoints the kiddies."

There was a moment of silence as the children stared in bewilderment at Mrs. Smith. For

them, the brightness of the day was gone; all in a second, the castles they had raised so happily had come tumbling down about their ears, and for no apparent reason. They could not understand it.

And then a strange thing happened; for, before Molly could find words in which to express her regret, Sally turned on Mrs. Smith like a perfect little Fury.

“You know you’re *not* sorry!” she blazed, unconsciously making use of the amazed woman’s own words of the day before. “You’re *glad!* You left her home on purpose, just to punish *us*! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, you—you terrible woman!” Then, in a flurry of tears, she fled into the house and up the stairs to her bedroom.

The children turned and walked dejectedly away.

When they had gone a short distance, Phyllis exclaimed in a tone of admiration, “My, wasn’t Sally corking? Wasn’t she just corking, though!”

And Hilda replied, a little breathlessly, "I don't see how she *dared*, do you, Phyll?"

"I'm right glad she sassed her," declared the loyal Maudie May. "My gran'mammy say dat Mis' Smiff is gettin' altogedder too uppety. She ain't nobody, nohow. What right she got bein' so sot up? She's jus' *ornery*, dat's what!"

Molly, in the meantime, was apologizing to her guest. "I can't tell you how sorry and ashamed I am," she said with heightened color. "I've never known Sally to be so rude, and am really at a loss to understand it. The only explanation I can find for her behavior, is that she simply *adores* Carlotta, and has been looking forward to this afternoon with so much pleasure that the disappointment of not having her come was too much for her. Please don't think, though, that I am trying to excuse her. I'm terribly mortified."

Mrs. Smith followed Molly into the house, looking about her sharply as she did so. No worn places on the rugs or furniture escaped the scrutiny of her eagle eyes. Compared with her

own highly-polished and up-to-date establishment, this simple, tasteful home looked shabby and old-fashioned. With a feeling almost of pity for Molly, she seated herself upon one of the slender, fiddle-back chairs, and began to fan herself with a small, hand-painted parchment fan.

"This younger generation!" she exclaimed with a shrug of her plump shoulders, "aren't they just the limit! I often tell my husband that this loose, modern way of bringing up children is to blame for half the stuff you read in the papers nowadays, about the problems of the present age. Children are allowed *too* much freedom, *too* much independence." She closed her fan sharply, and used it to rap out the emphasis of her remarks.

"Why, the majority of them think they know as much as their parents do," she continued with an amused smile. "*More*, in fact. They're *ab-so-lute-ly* impossible! That's the reason I am so strict with Carlotta. I am *determined* that she shall not be like that. She

must be obedient—no arguing about a thing, once I've told her to do it—and respectful; and she must not get her head full of all these silly notions about self-expression. She has a play-room and plenty of toys, and she has been trained to amuse herself there quietly, without upsetting the rest of the house. I should never *think* of allowing her to race all over the place the way *your children do.*"

"And yet," said Molly gently, "we ought to remember that, after all, they are little individuals, not all cut after one pattern. And too tight a check-rein is bound to have a bad effect."

Mrs. Smith snorted. "That's the whole trouble!" she exclaimed. "The *whole* trouble! Nowadays, the parents simply hand the reins over to the children and let *them* run things. No, Mrs. Brewster, I may be old-fashioned in this respect—" she laughed rather disagreeably—"but I thoroughly believe in keeping them under when they're young, else there's no living with them."

"I'm afraid we all expect too much of them at

times," returned Molly sadly. "We're apt to look for old heads on young shoulders."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Mrs. Smith brusquely. "You give them credit for a lot more sense than they possess. They're nothing but little animals, when they're young, and must be trained by the same methods."

Molly's face was singularly like Hilda's in the dreamy wistfulness of its expression, as she replied slowly, "I have always wanted my children to develop naturally; to have a free, happy, unrestrained childhood, one they could look back upon in later years with only pleasant memories. My own was like that,"—her eyes glowed reminiscently,—“and I want theirs to be. It helps so much in the years when cares and troubles and responsibilities begin to come. It's something that can never be taken from them, and that the passing of time only makes more lovely. Those memories, when they come in your maturer years are like looking at a wonderful picture, or a sunset over the water." She leaned forward in her earnestness. "Oh," she cried tensely, "they're

young for such a *little* while! Can't we help to make those years *completely* happy? If we fail in this, *what* can we give them that will make amends?"

Mrs. Smith looked at her strangely. "It's plain to see," she remarked coldly, "that our ideas in regard to child-training do not coincide at all."

To Molly's relief, Tom entered at this moment, and the conversation was naturally diverted into other channels. And presently she was able to excuse herself and go in search of Sally.

She found the small delinquent in her bedroom, staring moodily out of the window; but at sound of her mother's footsteps, she turned about and, as her eyes met Molly's grave ones, her whole face quivered.

"Are you cross with me, Mother?" she asked, a little tremor in her voice.

"Not cross," answered Molly, "but terribly ashamed that a guest in my house should be treated so rudely. I don't know what to think of you, Sally, for talking so to Mrs. Smith."

Sally's face settled into stubborn lines. "She was rude to *us*, yesterday," she said.

"That doesn't excuse *you*, Sally. So do people rob and burn and kill. Is that any reason why *we* should do those things?"

Sally drummed on the window-sill. At length she said defensively, "She's older than we are; and she shouldn't talk that way to *us*."

"Yes, it's true she *is* older than you; but that has nothing whatever to do with your conduct. This isn't a question of age, Sally, it's a question of manners."

Sally hung her head, and Molly continued:

"Mrs. Smith is the mother of your dearest friend, a guest in our house, and yet you practically insulted her."

"Well, she ought not to treat us the way she did," muttered Sally, "as if we didn't have any feelings. We don't like people to be rude to us, even if we *are* children."

"Perhaps when she was young no one taught her to control her temper nor to be considerate of other people's feelings. I *have* tried to teach

you those things, and it's a great mortification to me to find that I have failed."

Sally's brown eyes opened wide with surprise. "It isn't *your* fault, Mother," she exclaimed, "it's just *me!*"

A silence fell between them for a few moments, then, with a big sigh, Sally asked, "Do I have to tell her I'm sorry, Mother?"

"Have to? Why, no. Certainly not," answered Molly. "If you're *not* sorry, it won't help matters any to tell her that you are."

Sally looked thoughtful, and Molly, wisely saying nothing, watched the angry little face for some sign of relenting. At length she was rewarded, for, gradually the pouting under lip drew in, the puckered forehead smoothed, the drooping shoulders straightened, and Sally threw her a fleeting, shamefaced smile.

"I'll tell her," she gulped, swallowing a rising sob.

"Are you sure you really mean it?"

"Ye-es." There was hesitation in the reply.

"*Sure?*"

Sally burst into tears. "Oh," she cried, "I don't know *why* I talked that way to her. I felt so bad 'cause Carlotta didn't come, an' then Mrs. Smith acted so horrid, just as if it made her *happy* to see us all so disappointed, an' I just couldn't stand it, Mother, I couldn't *stand* it! I *had* to say something or else b-bust!"

Molly stooped and kissed her gently. Though she knew that Sally's conscience had won the battle, she also knew the difficulty of the task which lay before her, for Mrs. Smith was in no gracious mood; and realizing this, her heart yearned over the small penitent.

But once she had made up her mind to do the thing, Sally did not falter. And Molly, from the landing, watched the little figure as it slowly descended the stairway, longing, with all the strength of a mother's heart, to lend the moral support of her presence, yet fearful that by doing so she might lessen the child's confidence in herself.

The last step reached, Sally turned for a final look at the strengthening eyes above her; then,

squaring her shoulders, marched into the living-room and straight up to Mrs. Smith.

That lady was deep in a recital of a recent travelling experience: "Why, when they told us twenty dollars a *day*," she was saying impressively to Tom, "we supposed of course it included meals—" when a timid hand upon her knee made her look down, and she met Sally's big, dark eyes fixed upon her with a wide, appealing gaze. Immediately her affability dropped from her like a cloak, and she stiffened visibly. But Sally was not to be discouraged.

"Mrs. Smith," she said in her clear, childish treble, with just a hint of tears, "I didn't mean to be rude to you. It wasn't nice. I hope you will forgive me."

But Mrs. Smith did not unbend. She sat as stiff and cold as a statue; and Sally, seeing no hint of softening in the hard gray eyes, hastily finished her apology.

"I just wanted to tell you," she continued, swallowing hard and blinking very fast, "that I'm sorry,—at least,—not *very*!"

Then she was gone, out of the front door and across the lawn to the swing where the children were gathered, skimming the ground like a bird on the wing, her heart apparently as light as the feet which carried her.

Tom and Molly talked it over that evening after the children had gone to bed. "I had hard work to keep my face straight," said Tom, chuckling. "She was so perfectly honest about it. But you should have seen Mrs. Smith's expression. Poor thing! She has no sense of humor!"

"What did she say?" asked Molly wretchedly.

"Well, she sort of gasped, and then made some remark about children being more truthful than polite," grinned Tom. "Then, mercifully, the other guests arrived."

Molly sighed. "O dear, I'm afraid we're utterly, hopelessly disgraced," she said.

"Cheer up, old lady!" answered Tom with one of his big, hearty laughs. "*I'll* never desert you, as the immortal Mrs. Micawber would say, never, never, never!"

CHAPTER X

A WANDERER RETURNS

THE 7.15 from New York rolled slowly into the little station at Armitage, and came to a stop with a great screaming of brakes and letting-off of steam, for all the world like a self-important person trying to attract attention to himself.

Though a busy, bustling town during that portion of the year when the University was in session, during the summer months, Armitage settled down into a state of inactivity closely resembling the proverbial “doornail;” but the coming of autumn invariably wakened it to a life of such renewed vigor that it seemed as if the rest had been almost essential in order that the drowsy old town might gather strength to carry on for another ten months.



"HOME AT LAST!"—*Page 181*

On this occasion, the New York train had but a single passenger to discharge, a tall, clean-cut, youngish-looking man whose dress and bearing, as well as the patchwork of foreign labels on his bags, proclaimed him the accustomed traveller. But there was a noticeable weariness in the droop of the broad shoulders, a settled melancholy in the dark eyes which made you feel that sorrow had etched the lines about his firm, yet almost boyish mouth.

He stood on the platform for a moment with a dazed, preoccupied air, as if unaware of his surroundings; then, as though starting from a dream, he shook himself and began to look about.

“Home, at last!” he breathed, his eyes travelling slowly over the little square brick building in its oasis of close-cropped grass whereon letters three feet in height, of whitewashed cobblestones, proclaimed the important fact that this was A-R-M-I-T-A-G-E.

“Same old town,” he commented, lighting a cigarette and letting his gaze drift past the station and on towards the twinkling lights of the

business center. "Wonder if I'll have trouble getting some one to drive me out home."

He walked briskly around to the rear of the building, hoping for a sight of some conveyance; but all he found was a solitary Ford standing, abandoned, in the cinder-blackened road.

"Looks as if it might have been here since the Year One," he remarked to himself, examining the dilapidated vehicle with something of amusement. "Shouldn't wonder if it were the first one Henry made."

Then, convinced of the hopelessness of the situation, he put his head in at the station doorway and called to the placid-looking individual in charge of the ticket-office, "Any chance of my getting a taxi?"

"No sir,—not a chance!" was the discouraging reply. "Weddin' over to Curtiss Plains tonight. All the for-rent cars are over there. We don't have no reg'lar taxi service."

"Confound it!" Rodney Harrington thrust his hands deep into his trousers pockets and surveyed the tips of his well-polished shoes with a

troubled frown. The possibility of this development had not entered into his calculations. Of course he could telephone Molly; if she and Tom were home, he knew they would gladly drive over in the car and get him. But that would spoil his plan; the plan he had made when he found his boat was docking sooner than had been expected when he sent his radiogram, thus enabling him to catch an afternoon train instead of waiting until the following morning. It would be so much fun to walk in upon them unexpectedly. The thought of their surprise would help to tide him over the dreadful emptiness of his return. The sight of the children's faces when he should suddenly appear at breakfast, would serve to lessen the pathos of that little vacant chair.

"If it weren't for the bags," he said presently, "I could walk."

"How far y' goin'?" asked the agent.

"A couple of miles out on the Turnpike," Rodney answered.

The agent looked at him sharply. "I thought

I reco'nized you," he said, "Don't you belong out to Brewster's?"

Rodney nodded.

The agent shoved his head out through the ticket window and looked at Rodney with his pale, rather near-set eyes. "Exactly like a turtle coming out of its shell," thought Rodney with amusement.

"Well," he said after a moment's scrutiny, "seems 's if there'd oughta be *somebody* could take yuh. Hank Allen was in here an hour or so ago. He lives out your way. Mebbe he'll drive yuh."

"Allen?" repeated Rodney, "I don't think I remember him."

"No, Hank's new to these parts," replied the agent. "Comes from 'way over beyond Oldfield. Just bought the Butterfield property. That's out beyond you, ain't it, over towards Curtiss Plains?"

"Yes," replied Rodney. "Why, if he lives there, he's our next door neighbor. Is that his car outside?"

"Yep,—that's his E-lizabeth," answered the agent with a grin.

Rodney strolled up and down the little box-like room. "Any idea when What's-'is-name will be back?" he asked presently.

The agent cocked his ear and listened. "There's the 8.05 whistlin' for the bend, now," he remarked. "Hank oughta be here soon. He ain't one for keepin' late hours."

"I should think not, if he's depending on *that* to get him home," responded Rodney.

"Well she ain't much fer looks," admitted the agent, "but—papa! She kin *go!*"

Rodney paced restlessly about while the hands of the station clock registered five, ten, fifteen minutes; then, suddenly, from without came a loud report like an explosion, followed almost instantly, by what sounded like a fusillade of shots.

"A hold-up!" he exclaimed, making for the door.

"Naw, that ain't no hold-up," replied the agent calmly, "that's Hank." And opening the

window of his little coop, he leaned out and bawled loud enough to be heard above the continued uproar, "Hey, Hank! There's a gen'leman here wants to git out to Brewster's. Got a couple o' heavy bags. I said mebbe you'd take 'im."

"All right. Tell 'im to come along!" called a big, good-natured voice with something of a nasal twang.

Rodney stepped forward. "That's mighty good of you," he said, "a great accommodation. Is there going to be room for these?" He motioned towards his bags.

"Whew!" Hank left his car and inspected the bags with a good deal of interest. "Looks like you've been to furrin' parts," he commented, attempting to decipher the vari-colored labels. "Sure there's room fer 'em. I'll jest stow 'em in the back." And, with Rodney's assistance, he immediately did so.

"Ever been here before?" he shouted as they climbed aboard, and the car, after a series of explosions, each of which seemed to threaten its

complete destruction, sprang forward with a violence which nearly sent them from their seats.

"Oh, yes, I *live* here," yelled Rodney. "My name is Harrington. I'm a brother of Mrs. Brewster's; but I've been abroad for the past ten months."

"You don't say!" ejaculated Hank. "Well, then, I s'pose you've seed about ever'thin' that's wuth seein'."

"I travelled around a bit at first," Rodney replied at the top of his lungs, "but for the last four months I've been in Paris."

"Paris? Lordy! I s'pose you've seed the Eefel tower, then," roared Hank.

"Yes, indeed."

"An' these-here what-you-call-ums,—gondoleers?"

"Yes, I spent nearly two weeks with friends in Venice."

"An' London Bridge?"

"I've walked across it many times."

"Ever seed the Prince o' Wales?"

"I've seen him playing golf."

"Well, I *swan!*!" Hank was so completely overcome by this statement that for a few blocks he rode without speaking. When at length he had recovered his speech, however, he remarked with an air of satisfaction, "Well, I know som'p'n you *ain't* seed, an' that's our new Post Office, 'cause 'twa'n't started till this spring. I'll drive ye by it."

"Yes, do. I'd like to see it," said Rodney. "We needed one badly."

"You've said it!" responded Hank. "An' let me tell yuh, we got a beaut! Here 'tis."

They drew up before the little turreted, white-stone structure, Hank calling attention to its points of excellence with true civic pride. "Ye see that light up in the tower?" he asked. "Well sir, ye can see that light fer *miles!*"

Rodney was properly impressed.

They drove on, then, through the old familiar streets, Rodney commenting upon such improvements as he could observe as they swept along their jarring, jangling way: a freshly painted block of stores, a new wing on the Grammar

School, an iron fence around the Baptist Church, a gasoline station just beyond the park.

Hank accepted these remarks with the air of one who felt himself personally responsible for all these indications of prosperity.

"I tell you," he said presently, "Armitage is po-gressive. Yes, sir, po-gressive! I'll bet there ain't nothin' in Europe or Paris that's any up-to-dater."

They were outside the town, now, speeding along at a good rate. Rodney suspected that Hank was "lettin' 'er out," just to show what the little car could do when given the opportunity. But, presently, their pace slackened. "I allus slow up a bit here," explained Hank as they came in sight of a sharp bend in the road ahead, "'count of a bad accident they had here last year. Some drunks from Curtiss Plains, goin' sixty an hour, so they say, took the turn on the wrong side an' purt' near run into a car comin' from Armitage. The driver o' that car tried to turn out quick, an' he turned too far an' went clean over the edge. See, there's quite a drop here?" He

waved his arm to indicate the spot; then added, "Smashed his car to smithereens, yes, sreee, an' killed a little girl."

Rodney shuddered. How well he remembered it all!—If only he *could* forget!

But Hank, entirely oblivious of the unresponsiveness of his companion, continued cheerfully, "There's too much fast drivin' through these parts, an' too much bootleg licker. Not but what I likes a nip myself, occasional—" he slapped his hip-pocket significantly,—"but I'm purty durn keerful where I gets it."

"Well, here we are!" exclaimed Rodney a few moments later, as the familiar gate-posts came in sight. "Now if you'll let me out, I'll walk up. I'm awfully obliged to you for giving me a lift. Don't bother to drive in." He held out his hand, knowing better than to offer any payment.

"Tain' no bother," said Hank good-naturedly, working Rodney's arm up and down vigorously like a pump-handle. "Stay right in, I'll drive ye to the door."

"No," protested Rodney, "really,—I'd prefer

to get out here. I can manage the bags quite well for such a short distance."

Hank's countenance betrayed amazement as he stopped the car at the foot of the drive. To Rodney's amused fancy, Armitage, figuratively speaking, seemed to be always waiting, mouth agape, for an explanation to any unforeseen decision; and for some unaccountable reason, he always found himself humoring its curiosity. He did so now.

"My sister's children will be asleep," he said, climbing down from the ancient vehicle, "they don't know I'm coming. I want to steal a march on them and surprise them in the morning. You know how children are; they love surprises."

Hank chuckled. "I don't blame ye," he said, helping him out with his bags, "an' this-here Ford o' mine ain't the silentest thing on wheels, neither. I know them kids,—five o' them, ain't there? Seen em, drivin' out o' here with Amos, yestiddy. He sets a store by 'em."

Rodney came to with a start, suddenly remembering. How natural it had been to think of

five! The pain of the reawakened memory made him speak sharply.

"No," he said "there are only four,—three girls and a boy."

Hank was plainly disgruntled at his implied miscount. "Yes, there *was* five," he protested. "I seen 'em plain. There was four brown heads an' one goldy."

They parted from each other with cordial "good-nights," and Hank's rear lights disappeared down the road amid a noise like a mitrailleuse.

"Must have been the little Smith girl," mused Rodney, his mind dwelling stubbornly upon the other's final statement.

He stood there in the moonlight, looking about him. How the old place tugged at his heart-strings! From its dark setting of trees, the well-loved house, softly lighted and unshuttered, glowed like a jewel, all blemishes, for the time being, effaced by the moonlight's fairy fingers.

"Jean!" he whispered softly, "Jean!"

How she seemed to dominate the place!

He could feel her presence everywhere. There was the swing where, so often, he had tossed her up among the branches while she gurgled with delight; here, the rock where she had bruised her little knee; a bush where they had played at hide-and-seek; the window where she always watched for him. She seemed so near! It seemed as if she *must* hear his heartsick, desolate cry, "Jean! Jean! Jean!"

On tiptoe, Rodney mounted the steps, and found the front door standing wide,—no sign of Tom or Molly anywhere.

"Must have gone out for the evening," he muttered, setting down his bags. "I'll just say 'Hello' to Gussie and then tote these upstairs. My word! but they weigh a ton!"

With a feeling of depression, he wandered through the empty rooms and out to the kitchen, where he found Gussie nodding in her chair. Had he been doubtful of his welcome, her reception, alone, would have been enough to reassure him, for she all but threw her arms about his neck.

"Where are all the folks, Gussie?" he asked when her excitement had somewhat abated.

"Well, cose de chilluns is in bed, Mr. Rodney," she replied, "an' Mr. Tom an' Mis' Molly is gone to a weddin' ovah to Curtiss Plains."

"Oh, yes, I heard about that," Rodney answered ruefully. "I guess I'll go upstairs and wash. Do you think I could have a snack when I come down?"

"You suah could, Mr. Rodney," was Gussie's delighted reply, "I'll git de coffee on right dis minute." And she straightway began to bustle about in a very businesslike manner.

Rodney made his way upstairs, pausing for an instant outside the children's bedroom door where he could here Hilda laughing in her sleep, and Sally muttering something about being "sorry," her drowsy voice dwindling away into a sob. Then he passed on down the hall to his own door, and, opening it, switched on the light.

The familiar room leaped into view, ready and waiting, as he, somehow, knew it would be. No one ever caught Molly napping when it came to

the matter of arranging for anybody's comfort or happiness. Moreover, she always managed to do something to a room which seemed to waken it to life; almost as if she left some of her own gay spirit there to bid one welcome. There was the bed all freshly made, a vase of spicy, old-fashioned pinks upon the chiffonier, new books and magazines upon the bedside stand, cool linen covers for his Morris chair, and close beside it, a tabouret with an ash-receiver and his favorite brand of "smokes."

He sank down on the bed, and dropped his face into his hands, his eyes smarting with the pain of unshed tears. For a while he sat there, motionless, crushed by a sense of his loss; but gradually there began to steal over him a feeling of consolation, almost of happiness, in the presence of all these friendly, well-loved objects about him. Slowly, the sorrow and bitterness of those long, weary months ebbed away, leaving a sense of peace behind.

And presently he raised his head and looked about him calmly. Here in this quiet place he

could forget his pain. It really seemed as if his darling were close by, waiting for his return; that, at any moment, she might come running in to throw her arms about his neck. How often he had seen her come dancing through that door to welcome him! *That door*, behind which, now, lay only emptiness! But why was it closed? It always had stood open. Did they think that the sight of the room beyond with all its dear reminders would be more than he could bear? Why, closing it, seemed like trying to shut her and all her winsome memories out of his life forever.

Rodney went to the door and opened it, and stood hesitating on the threshold, looking in.

The little room lay very peaceful in the moonlight, so quiet, so unchanged, he fancied as he stood there he could hear a gentle breath. How often he had stood thus looking in upon her as she slept! But was this fancy? Was not that a sigh? Slowly his gaze passed round the sacred little place, resting in mute caress on each simple treasure there: her tiny wicker rocking-chair,

her shelf of bedtime story books, her clothes-tree with its naked, outstretched arms, her patient, faithful Teddy bear, her crib, so small and white and lonely in the far corner of the room. But, what was this? A dream? A miracle? He rubbed his eyes, scarcely daring to believe his senses; then looked again and saw a golden head upon the pillow, two large eyes gazing into his.

With a single stride Rodney was across the room and kneeling by the bedside; his hungry arms had closed around the little form so magically like the one he loved. "Jean!" he whispered brokenly. "My little Jean! You have come back to me, again!"

CHAPTER XI

UNCLE RODDY

ABOUT an hour later, when Tom and Molly returned from the wedding, they were amazed to find Rodney, ensconced in Tom's big easy-chair with Natalie upon his knee listening, entranced, to the tale of "The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids."

"So you've made this young lady's acquaintance already?" said Tom when their greetings were over.

"Yes, and had a complete history of her case from Gussie," replied Rodney, smiling reminiscently at the dramatic, though somewhat confused account she had given him.

"Then there's nothing more to be said, I'm sure," laughed Tom.

Rodney looked grave, then he said, "Well, *I* have something to say, and that is, that it's got

to be a pretty strong claim that takes her away from me, now. We need each other, don't we, old sweets?" He looked fondly down into the blue eyes raised so confidingly to his.

For answer, Natalie threw both arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder. And when, presently, she dropped off to sleep, Rodney turned to Tom with an anxious air. "There's been no mention of her in any of the papers?" he asked.

Tom shook his head. "And no rumor of her anywhere," he added. "And I've done considerable scouting about these last few days. Not that we're anxious to get rid of her; we've all fallen desperately in love with her. But I can't help thinking about the other side of the story, for of course there is another side, and somewhere, somebody's heart must be almost broken at losing her."

"They should have been more careful of her, then," flared Molly. "When I think of that night, that storm, those poor little blistered feet! How could they be so heedless? I'd like to know

where she came from and how she got here, just to satisfy my curiosity, but if it means we'd have to give her up, I'd rather let it always be a mystery. She's so happy here with us. I sometimes feel as if she'd never known what a good time was until now."

"Yes," agreed Tom, "her whole attitude towards her former life is one of absolute indifference. Yet she doesn't seem like a child who has been neglected."

"Not *physically*," interposed Molly, "but her little soul seems starved. What her life could have been, I cannot imagine. Lonely, I judge from what the children tell me. Why, since that first night when she asked if her mother was here, she has hardly mentioned her, nor expressed the slightest desire to go home."

"Quite the contrary," laughed Tom. "She told us very positively the next morning at breakfast, that she intended to stay."

"Poor little puss," sighed Rodney as he laid his cheek against the softly-flushed one of the sleeping child.

Molly's eyes grew tender as she watched them. "What about your play, Rod?" she asked presently. "Let's see,—what did you name it?"

"'His Princess,'" answered Rodney, his face brightening at mention of it. "And, by the way, I must tell you the wonderful streak of luck I had in regard to it."

Molly leaned forward, her face alight with interest. And Rodney, guessing the reason for her eagerness, answered smilingly, "No, it hasn't been accepted yet, but I had the good fortune to come back on the same boat with Ainslee Carruthers."

"What!" exclaimed Tom, "the theatrical manager?"

"The very same," said Rodney jubilantly. "And that isn't all! He had his niece with him, and she turned out to be no other than Susanne Fitch, the little star who made such a hit last season in 'Will o' the Wisp'."

"Did you meet her?" asked Molly.

"Met both of them," answered Rodney, "and what's more, succeeded in interesting Carruthers

in my play. He read it and said he liked it and that's encouraging. He's about the most difficult of the New York Managers to get next to, and I probably never would have got a reading if I hadn't had the luck to run into him as I did in crossing."

"Well, that *was* luck!" cried Tom delightedly. "If he *should* like it enough to put it on," continued Rodney, "and decide to star *her* in it, I feel confident of its success. For, to tell you the truth, I had her in mind when I wrote the leading part. It was seeing her performance in 'Will o' the Wisp', that gave me the idea for my play. It just fairly grew around her, once I began to write it. I have only to shut my eyes to see her in the part of 'Yvette' to hear her say the lines. She would be wonderful, exquisite!" He broke off abruptly, realizing that he had said more than he intended.

"What's she like off the stage?" asked Molly with a woman's curiosity.

"An extremely charming little woman, not at all theatrical in either dress or manner," Rod-

ney replied. "And just at present, in some trouble, for she was dressed in mourning."

"Is she married?" asked Molly.

"I never heard that she was," answered Rodney, "but in the theatrical world it's hard to tell. They're all 'Miss', even when they've been married several times and have grown families. However, in this case, it's pretty safe to say she isn't, for if she *were*, some one with a 'nose for news' would surely have discovered it and published it broadcast."

"Oh, Tom, isn't it exciting," cried Molly, her cheeks like roses, "to think of Rod being a full-fledged playwright?"

"Don't count the chickens before they're hatched, Molly," laughed Rodney, mightily pleased in spite of his efforts to conceal it. "It's a mistake to be too optimistic."

"I feel in my bones, it's going to be a success!" she answered happily.

"And let me tell you, Molly has very prognosticating bones," interposed Tom with a grin. "So I prophesy that presently we'll all of us be

living in a sort of reflected glory. As Gussie would probably express it, we'll be very much 'sot up'."

But Molly did not respond to his banter; she was looking at Rodney rather wistfully. "O dear," she said, "I only hope that if it is successful, it won't take you away from us again. It seems so good to have you back. We've missed you dreadfully."

Rodney's face was sober as he said, "I don't suppose I can make you understand just what it means to me to be back. For a long time after I left, I felt that I could never bear to see the place again. Then, one night, quite suddenly, a longing for it seized me. I longed for its big, low, pleasant rooms, for the garden and the orchard, for the sound of the crickets at night and for Gussie's good home-cooking; but, most of all, I wanted to be with some one who belonged to me,—who loved me." He waited for his voice to grow steady, and then added, simply, "I wanted to see the children."

"Dear Roddy," said Molly softly, "if you

only knew how much it means to us to have you back!"

"Once I'd made up my mind to come, I couldn't get here fast enough," he continued, "I could hardly wait till morning to get started. Why, if there hadn't been any other way of making it, I'd cheerfully have swam the Atlantic, and crawled the rest of the way on my hands and knees." He looked about the softly lighted room with its comfortable, homelike air, and drew a deep breath of contentment. "And for all my dreaming of it, I never realized quite what it meant to me, until to-night," he said.

Molly was deeply moved. "I'm glad you love it so," she replied, "Sometimes I used to be afraid that you might not want to come back —ever. It was hard to answer the children's questions as to when you are coming back, and why you stayed so long. Why—why—what's that?" She broke off suddenly, lifting a warning finger.

But a reply was unnecessary; for at that instant, four nightgowned, tousled-headed fig-

ures appeared, as if by magic, in the room. They surrounded Rodney's chair and flung themselves upon him. "Uncle Roddy! Uncle Roddy!" The room resounded with their laughter, their happy shouting. Natalie, roused from her sleep, added her voice to theirs, and for a short time pandemonium reigned. Their arms entwined his neck, their eager kisses fell upon his cheeks, his neck, his ears. Rodney was overcome and speechless. And Gussie, attracted by the clamor, thrust her head in at the door, grinning broadly; then withdrew as suddenly as she had come.

"How you all have grown!" cried Rodney, staggering to his feet, when at length he was able to free himself from their fierce embraces. "I wouldn't believe ten months *could* make such a difference! Now, line up, and let me get you sorted out!—Why, Bobs, you buster, you're a 'reg'lar feller' now! Sally's not as fat as when I left. She must be dieting. Phyllis, you're brown as a little Indian. Hilda, you're as tall as your mother, I believe."

He kissed them all again, taking each little face between his hands in the way that Hilda loved.

"Uncle Woddy, where's your bags?" inquired Bobby after a disappointed survey of the room.

Rodney laughed. "Up in my room," he answered, "two *big* ones. And to-morrow I'll unpack them with your kind assistance."

Bobby smiled happily.

"And now, you rascals," said Rodney shaking his finger at them, playfully, "look me in the eye and tell me how you knew I'd come."

Phyllis, as usual took the floor. "Well," she said, "we'd all been talking about you so much that when I went to sleep, I dreamed that you were here. An' after a while, I woke up, an' I thought I heard you laugh. At first, I didn't know for sure whether it was real or just a dream; but I woke up Hilda, an' we tiptoed out to the head of the stairs, and then we could hear your voice as plain as anything. So we went back an' woke up Sally and Bobs, and then we *all* went in to get Natalie."

"But when we got to her room, her bed was empty. She was gone!" broke in Sally.

"Yes," continued Phyllis. "And we were afraid her mother had come and taken her away while we were sleeping. An' we felt so *awful*, that *you . . . an'—an' everything*—went right out of our heads."

Sally nodded confirmation. "We almost *cried*," she said solemnly.

"Then all at once, we thought of Uncle Roddy," said Hilda to her mother. "We were sure that he would help us get her back. So we came downstairs, an' when we saw him—why, there was Natalie, too. So then we knew that everything was all right."

"Eve'ysing all wight," echoed Bobby sleepily. Molly's eyes lingered on their glowing faces. "'God's in His heaven,'" she quoted, smiling at them tenderly.

"'All's right with the world!'" they shouted in instantaneous response.

The old clock on the landing boomed "Twelve." Bob and Natalie were nodding.

"Come now, to bed, again! Instanter!" ordered Molly.

So Tom shouldered Bobby, Rodney carried Natalie, and Phyllis and Sally, arm-in-arm, pranced on behind. Hilda, however, waited for her mother.

"Mother," she said dreamily, slipping an arm about Molly's waist, "you know that darling little bird down in the arbor that comes an' sits so close to us sometimes when we are quiet?"

"Yes, dear, the little song-sparrow," said Molly.

"Well, when he sings to us, he shakes all over an' acts as if he was so happy that he *had* to sing, or burst. Mother, I feel just like that now. I wish that I could sing like that, to-night."

CHAPTER XII

THE BLOW FALLS

"UNCLE RODDY, *when* are you going to sing for us?"

It was Phyllis who asked the question in a rather plaintive voice. Breakfast was over, and the family had assembled on the wide, sunny verandah at the side of the house. Here, Molly busied herself with the contents of a heaped-up darning-basket, while the two men settled down to enjoy a quiet smoke. The children, however, were restless. They had planned a full day for Uncle Roddy, and were impatient to have him to themselves.

"I think Uncle Roddy ought to be allowed to do as he likes the first morning he's here, don't you?" asked Molly.

"I know what he wants to do," said Bobby, who had been hovering about the swing in which

his idol lay. "You know, Uncle Woddy, som'p'n upstairs. *Bags!*" he added in a loud whisper.

Rodney laughed. "Right you are, old man," he said. "I didn't forget. We'll attend to the matter as soon as I finish this cigarette."

Bobby's face became wreathed in smiles. "I didn't forget, eiver," he remarked with an absurdly self-righteous air.

"Your memory, Bobs, is something marvelous," chuckled Tom.

"Specially about presents," added Sally with a knowing look.

Rodney raised his eyebrows. "Who said anything about presents?" he asked innocently. Whereat Sally got very red, and Bobby looked decidedly worried.

He watched with ill-concealed impatience while the cigarette slowly dwindled; and when at length, it was entirely consumed, pounced upon his victim, like a small bird of prey, and conveyed him to the upper regions, sternly forbidding the others to follow. So, obedient to his command, though silently protesting, the

little girls remained behind, a disconsolate group about the newel-post.

It was hard, indeed, to wait below, within ear-shot of those tantalizing sounds. But not for worlds would they have gone to a more distant spot where the sounds would have been inaudible. There were squeals and loud, excited cries from Bobby, mysterious thumps and the rustling of paper, hearty laughter from Uncle Roddy, and the low-toned rumble of his voice. Then after what seemed to the small listeners an eternity, at last, at *last*, the sound of their returning footsteps. Could anything have been more welcome?

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, ladies," called Rodney's cheery voice, and looking up, they saw him smiling at them over the balustrade.

"It would have taken considerably longer if I had not had such able and enthusiastic assistance," he continued as Bobby appeared at the head of the stairs, his arms loaded with bundles, his small body almost bursting with importance. Rodney followed close behind him with more

bundles. To the weary watchers below, it was a captivating sight.

"Now, all hands line up," commanded Rodney, halting on the landing and putting down his load. And as Tom and Molly, attracted by the excitement, appeared in the doorway, he called, "Tell Gussie I want her, too." Whereupon that individual appeared, dish-towel in hand, as if suddenly materialized out of space.

"Ah, there she is, and my old friend Maudie May, as well!" he cried delightedly, at sight of the eager little black face peering out from behind Gussie's portly form.

"Now I guess we're ready to begin," said Rodney, gazing down at the row of expectant, up-turned faces in the hall below. "Here, Bobs, you hand the packages to me and we'll see who's good at catching. The first seems to be for Hilda. Here you are! Good catch, sweetheart! Now Sally! Ah, there, you missed it! Glad it wasn't breakable. Phyllis, watch out, now; this one *might* break! Molly, here's one for you! Gussie, this came straight from gay

Paree! Natalie, hold out your skirt, and I'll toss this into it! Tom, old scout, you're in this too! Maudie May, don't giggle so, or you'll muff this, sure as fate!"

Such shrieks of laughter as he bombarded them with gifts; as gloves, toys, handkerchiefs, and souvenirs of every description came showering down! Such cries of wonder and delight as each package was opened and its contents came to light! Such wild excitement and hullabaloo in general! Christmas in July!

At last, when all the presents had been looked at and admired a dozen times, and Rodney had been thanked, kissed and congratulated on the good taste displayed in his selections, Phyllis again broached the subject of a song.

"All right," said Rodney, good-naturedly, going over to the piano, "What shall it be?"

"Oh, 'Danny Deever,' of course," they cried with one accord.

"Sure you won't be frightened?"

"We *love* to be frightened! We *love* to get all cold and shivery!" they declared. And as

Rodney started the familiar prelude, the little girls, shuddering in delicious anticipation, huddled in one corner of the sofa, while Bobby, inwardly quaking, but with an outward show of bravado, sat by himself, astride the back.

"What are the bugles blowin' for?" said Files-on-Parade,
"To turn you out, to turn you out," the Color-Sergeant
said.

"What makes you look so white, so white?" said Files-on-
Parade.

"I'm dreadin' what I've got to watch," the Color-Sergeant
said.

"For they're hangin' Danny Deever, you can hear the
Dead March play.

The Regiment's in 'ollow square,— they're hangin' him
to-day.

They've taken of his buttons off an' cut his stripes away.
An' they're hangin' Danny Deever in the mornin'."

How they did love it! Rodney, who was a skilled performer, had lost none of his ability to thrill that little audience. They seemed fairly to drink in words and music with all their eyes and ears. Even Bobby, though he barely understood what it was all about, stopped wriggling, and listened with wide, solemn eyes to the very

end. And when the last crashing chord had been struck, and Rodney swung around on the piano bench to face them once more, he asked in an awestruck whisper, "Did he—did he *die*?"

"I'm inclined to think he did, sonny," answered Tom.

"Uncle Roddy," said Hilda, "a man sang 'Danny Deever' over the radio last week."

"It didn't sound the same as when *you* sing it, though," remarked Sally.

"O my goodness,—I should say not!" Phyllis's tone was decidedly scornful. "He didn't make us feel the least bit creepy. He only bleated like a poor sick sheep."

They all laughed at the recollection.

"So, at last you've succumbed to the popular hobby," grinned Rodney, turning to Tom. I thought you were inclined to class all radio owners among the feeble-minded."

Tom smiled ruefully. "So I was," he admitted. "But that was because I had become prejudiced against them. They *are* a nuisance in the hands of thoughtless or ignorant people,

blaring away at all hours of the day or night, broadcasting stuff that's a positive insult to the intelligence of the great American public. But, like everything else, they have their good points, and since Molly gave me this one for Christmas, I've really become quite a fan."

"Where do you keep it?" asked Rodney, looking about.

At this question, Bobby suddenly became active. "Wait!" he called imperiously, beginning to clamber down from his lofty perch. "I'll show you!"

And crossing the room to Molly's antique desk, he mounted a convenient chair, and threw open its leaded glass doors with the grand air of a showman exhibiting his choicest wares.

"See? Here it is!" he announced in the gruff little voice he always affected when feeling rather important. And there, fitted neatly into the shelf-space intended for books, was a fine radio set.

Rodney whistled. "Shades of Governor Winthrop!" he exclaimed, "that a desk of Puritan

ancestry should be a party to such deception!"

"Want me to turn it on?" asked Bobby, eager to show his familiarity with the mysterious new toy.

"By all means," answered Rodney, "if you're sure that you know how."

"Course I do," was that young man's complacent reply. "But, where's Natty? I want her to see me do it."

"Oh, Bobs!" groaned Molly, as she rolled up a pair of Sally's small white socks, "I do hope you're not going to be a 'show-off'."

Bobby's under lip pushed itself out stubbornly. "I want her to see me do it," he repeated firmly.

"She and Sally went to find Maudie May," said Hilda. "They'll be back in a minute, I guess."

Phyllis chuckled. "I bet they won't be back at *all*," she remarked. Don't you smell something?"

Bobby sniffed the air; then his face underwent a complete change.

"Cookies!" he squealed, and began to scramble down, entirely forgetful of his self-imposed task. And while they roared with laughter, he made a hasty exit.

Tom laid down his pipe and strolled over to the instrument. "I guess it's up to me to start it, then," he said, beginning to manipulate the dials. "I had Chicago yesterday. Suppose we see what one of the New York stations has for us this morning."

There followed considerable whanging and squealing. "That's static," explained Phyllis, putting her hands over her ears to shut out the din. And then, quite suddenly the discord ceased and a loud voice spoke from a disk on the wall, directly above their heads.

"Station WZHK," it said, "Missing Persons Bureau broadcasting. Five Thousand Dollars reward is offered for the return of Natalie Gray, missing since July 15th. She is four years old, three feet five inches tall, yellow curly hair, blue eyes, birthmark like small red clover leaf on the left arm just below the shoulder. Last seen at Park Avenue and Sixty-third Street, New York City. Address all communications to Missing Persons Bureau, 240 Center Street, New York City."

Whatever else the voice may have said, none of them knew. They all sat as if turned to stone, gazing at each other with unseeing eyes.

Hilda was the first one to speak. "Why—why, Mother," she said in a frightened voice, "that's *our* Natalie."

Molly nodded; she dared not trust herself to reply. Though she had been expecting news of this sort every day for the past week, now it had actually come, it was in the nature of a shock. All the strength seemed to go out of her, leaving her as weak and nerveless as if she had been through a severe illness.

The two little girls were looking at her with pitiful, terror-stricken faces which had suddenly gone pale. She must not let them see how badly *she* was feeling. So, summoning all her will power, she said to them calmly, "I wish you girls would take Bobby's express cart and go out to the orchard and see how many apples you can pick up. Gussie wants to make some pies for dinner, and you know apple pie is Uncle Roddy's favorite."

"But, Mother," began Phyllis in a tone of anguish. Molly shook her head and motioned them to go, saying as they crept sadly away, "I wouldn't say anything about this to the others, dears. They will have to know it soon enough."

"Well," she said, dully, when they had gone, "it's come at last. I was beginning to hope that we might keep her."

Rodney did not answer. He had not moved from the spot where he was standing when the radio started; and, looking at him, Molly saw on his face an expression of blank despair.

Tom switched off the radio. "I suppose I'd better drive into town after lunch and send a telegram," he said. He took out his watch and looked at it in an abstracted sort of way. "Eleven o'clock," he muttered. Then, going over to a window, he stood looking out.

There was a long silence, through which, dimly, they could hear Bob's and Natalie's distant chatter. Then Molly said miserably, "They will be simply heartbroken."

"So shall we all," said Tom. "I tell you *I*

feel exactly as if I were having to give up one of my very own. She has crept into our hearts—" he stopped and cleared his throat. "Perhaps, after all, I'd better go right away," he said. "There's time before lunch, and I suppose every moment of delay must seem a year to those who are waiting for news. Will you come with me, Rod?"

"Thanks," said Rodney, "I guess I will. I have a couple of errands in town. Are you coming, Molly?"

"No, Roddy," answered Molly with her face averted. "The children may need me, and, besides, I feel about as jolly as a—a—graveyard." Her chin began to tremble. In spite of her womanliness, there was still a good deal of the child in Molly.

She watched the two men drive away, and then went sorrowfully up to her own room, for she felt that she wanted to be alone; but even that comfort was denied her, for she had scarcely closed the door when she heard a gentle tap upon it and there stood Hilda.

"Mother," she said, gazing at Molly with a woebegone expression on her usually sunny face, "is Father going to send word to those people in New York that Natalie is here?"

"Why, yes, dear, of course. It would be wrong not to."

Hilda came in and seated herself on the edge of the bed. Then she said in a low voice as if speaking to herself rather than to Molly, "Natalie's mother will come an' take her away from us, I s'pose."

"Yes, I suppose she will," answered Molly.

There was a long pause. Hilda seemed absorbed in watching her foot as she rubbed it slowly backwards and forwards across the rug. Then she looked up suddenly and said, "Mother, if we hadn't turned on the radio just then, we never would have known."

"Oh, yes, we should have learned of it in some other way," replied Molly. "We were bound to hear of it sooner or later."

Hilda began to weep softly. "But we've had her such a *little* while," she said.

"But the longer we had her, the harder it would be to give her up," replied Molly.

Hilda's whole soul was in her eyes as she raised them to Molly's. "Mother, dear," she pleaded, "let's pretend we didn't turn it on. Let's pretend we didn't know. Don't let Father send the message. We love her so, an' she doesn't *want* to go home. She wants to stay with us. She said so over an' over. Please, Mother.—Please ask Father not to. *He* doesn't want her to go and neither do you or Uncle Roddy—or Gussie—or—or *anybody*. When people love a little girl so much, she ought to belong to them."

"Why, Hilda, *dear!*!" Molly sat down beside her and stroked the brown curls tenderly. Her own eyes were wet. "We must remember, dear," she said, "that no matter how much we love her, her mother loves her more."

"She can't," flamed Hilda, "or she wouldn't let her get lost."

Molly was silent, remembering how recently she had made use of the same argument, her-

self. But Hilda was rapidly becoming hysterical; she clung to her mother, while sobs racked her slender body. "Don't let them take her away from us," she begged. "We can't give her up, Mother, we can't—we can't!"

"Hush, Hilda, hush!" soothed Molly.

"Mother, it was so terrible when little Jeanie went," said Hilda when she had grown a little calmer. "You don't know how we missed her until Natalie came. Now if they take *her* away from us, it'll be just like losing Jeanie all over again." At the thought, her tears began to flow afresh. Molly stooped and kissed her.

"Now, dear," she said, "we must all look at this thing sensibly. It's hard, I know, hard for all of us, for we all love her dearly. But that's *life*, Hilda. We have to learn to take the bitter with the sweet. Now, you lie here on my bed for awhile until you're feeling better; and then get up and wash your face and be a brave little girl. You must be a good example to the others. They will feel so badly when they hear."

"Yes, Phyllis feels just *awful*," said Hilda,

"an' we *had* to tell Sally, 'cause she saw that something was the matter. And when she heard what it was, she cried so hard it made her sick. She's lying on the grass down in the orchard, an' Phyllis is rubbing her head."

"Poor dears!" cried Molly, "I must go down and try to comfort them." And so saying, she wisely left Hilda to cry herself out.

CHAPTER XIII

A NEW DEVELOPMENT

MOLLY had been invited to a "Bridge" that afternoon, but as the hour for it drew near, she was in some indecision about leaving the children.

"If it were any one but the wife of the President of the University, who was giving it, I wouldn't go," she declared, after sending them upstairs to rest. "But I feel as if I ought not to back out at the last minute without a better excuse." She sighed, and added sadly, "Poor dears, they are *so* unhappy. I wonder if it would be dreadful for me to stay at home."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Tom who was inclined to scoff at her anxiety, "of course you must go. The children will be all right. Gussie can look after them and, besides, Rod and I will be here. He's going to help me clean the car. We

got a new kind of polish when we were in town. A man was demonstrating it in front of the Post Office. If it does all he claims for it, you won't recognize your old Packarderm when I call for you after the party."

"Don't work too hard," cautioned Molly as he started in the direction of the garage.

Then she made herself ready, not, however, without some misgivings; and just before leaving, stepped to the children's bedroom for a final glance at them. It did her heart good to find that they were sleeping, and to know that, for the time at least, their troubles were forgotten. As she moved noiselessly about the room, pulling down the shades and looping back the curtains, she felt easier in her mind. Perhaps, after all, the wound had not been so deep as she had feared. She stood looking down at their tranquil faces as they lay at her feet, stretched full-length on quilts upon the floor; and her heart swelled with pity at the thought of the sorrow that lay in store for them.

"O dear," she mused, "no matter how much we

love them, we can't keep trouble out of their lives. They have to meet it sometime. The best we can do is to teach them to face it like brave soldiers."

Then, running down to the kitchen, she gave Gussie a few parting instructions in regard to them.

"Be patient with them, Gussie," she pleaded, "their hearts are very sore."

Gussie, polishing the silver coffee-urn with a piece of soft chamois, did not raise her eyes as Molly spoke. But she nodded her head slowly. "I took note o' dat, Mis' Molly," she answered soberly. "Some o' dem been cryin', an' dey didn't eat no lunch, sca'cely."

"Yes, I know." Molly hesitated about breaking the news to Gussie, for in the few days Natalie had been with them, the old colored woman had become her devoted slave.

"Let them sleep as long as they will," she said, feeling the reproach of Gussie's averted eyes; for, as Tom had said, Gussie *was* more or less of an institution, having shared the joys and sor-

rows of the Brewster household since the days when Tom was Bobby's age.

"Yaas, Mis' Molly," answered Gussie, giving the glittering urn a final rub and setting it up on the table before her.

The meek reply was more than Molly could stand. She laid a gentle hand on Gussie's arm and said, "Gussie, I have bad news to tell you. Natalie's people have advertised for her. The word came over the radio this morning. She'll have to leave us soon, I'm afraid. *She* doesn't know it yet, and neither does Bobby; but the older children do, and are just heartbroken."

Throughout this recital, Gussie sat immovable, her black eyes fixed on Molly's face with an almost vacant stare. At its conclusion, however, she asked in a dull voice, "You mean she gwine to leave us, Mis' Molly?"

"Yes, Gussie," answered Molly sadly.

There was no such thing as fraud in Gussie's make-up; both in thoughts and actions she was as guileless as a child, and she showed this plainly now. With a low moan she let her hands

drop limply into her lap, while her chin sank slowly to her bosom and she began to sway backwards and forwards in time to a rhythmic, droning chant:

"Mah honey chile, she gwine away, she gwine away, she gwine away."

A lump came into Molly's throat. "Try not to take it too hard, Gussie," she said. "We're *all* going to miss her. You must remember that."

"She gwine away, she gwine away, she gwine away," mourned Gussie without raising her head.

Molly turned and fled down the drive.

"Where's my chauffeur?" she called as she came in sight of the two coatless and perspiring figures in the doorway of the garage.

"Whew, Molly!" exclaimed Rodney at sight of the rose-colored vision, "you're certainly a winner in that outfit!"

"Isn't she?" agreed Tom admiringly. "And let me tell you this, Rod, all on the quiet, there won't be another person at that party who can

hold a candle to *my* girl, for looks, or brains, either. Just wait a minute, honey, till I get my coat on.” Then he helped her into the car and, hopping in beside her, they drove quickly away, Molly waving a reluctant farewell.

“I’ll be right back, Rod,” called Tom over his shoulder.

“Take your time; I’ll find plenty to do,” answered Rodney.

He strolled aimlessly down the drive after the departing car and, halting between the two stone pillars which marked the entrance, looked out across the rolling countryside. Almost involuntarily, his gaze travelled in the direction of the Hobbs Hollow road, and through narrowed eyelids, he seemed to see a small, determined figure, trudging along its dusty length. “Poor little puss,” he murmured.

But his reverie was short-lived. It was interrupted presently, by a series of sounds closely resembling the din of a boiler factory.

“Methinks friend Hank draweth nigh,” he said, turning to look in the direction of Arm-

tage, whence a cloud of dust was rapidly approaching.

He stepped out into the road and, standing very stiff and straight, saluted as the car came abreast of him. Recognizing his passenger of the night before, Hank applied the brakes with such force that they screamed as though in mortal agony.

"Howdy," he called with a friendly grin.

"How are you, Hank?" said Rodney, stepping over to the car. Then fishing in his pocket for his cigarette-case, he held it out. "Have a smoke?" he asked.

"Don't mind if I do," was Hank's reply as he helped himself generously, putting one into his mouth and three into the pocket of his alpaca coat. Then, lighting up and crossing one leg over the other, he settled back for a comfortable chat, remarking genially, "I ain't so crazy about these little fellers. *Seegars* is my usual smoke."

"Sorry I haven't any to offer you," said Rodney, highly amused.

"Oh, these'll do all right," Hank answered,

puffing away, "but next time you're down to Armitage, go to the newspaper store right next to Durfee's Grocery, an' ask fer 'Lady Claires', three fer a nickel, they're great!"

Rodney promised to do so at his earliest opportunity, mentally observing that, if his friendship with Hank continued to thrive, it would be well to lay in a goodly supply.

They continued a pleasant exchange of remarks for a few moments; then, all at once, Hank leaned down out of his car and said in slightly lowered tones as if fearful of being overheard, "I hear ye had a streak o' luck."

Rodney looked perplexed. "Luck?" he repeated blankly, "that's news to me. I don't know what you mean."

Hank wagged his head with a knowing chuckle, as much as to say, "You know, but you won't admit it."

"No, really," said Rodney, "no joshing!—I don't know what you're driving at."

Hank showed his incredulity. "Most people would think it was good luck if they had five

thousand dollars throwed into their lap," he remarked dryly.

"Oh, come across with it, Hank," said Rodney, not, however, without a dawning realization as to what he meant.

"We-e-ell," drawled Hank, "I jest heard the news over to Armitage. I druv in to git some Mason jars fer my wife, she's cannin' strawber-ries to-day, an' run low on jars. Well, I stopped in to Mike MacDowell's Pool Room fer a chat with the fellers, an' while I was there, word came over his radio that there's a reward o' *five thousand dollars* fer a little girl that's been lost. An' someone was sayin' that *you've* got the little girl. Now, I call that a streak o' luck, don't you?"

Rodney did not reply at once; Hank, meanwhile, regarding him with frank curiosity. Then he said, "To tell you the truth, we, none of us, had given a thought to the reward." He hesitated, wondering if it would be wasted breath to try to explain just what their feelings were in the matter. He decided to risk it.

"You see, we all happen to be extremely fond of the little girl," he began; when Hank cut him short with a low whistle. "An' you're not goin' to claim the reward?" he asked in amazement.

"Why, no, of course not," Rodney answered.

"My eye!" exclaimed Hank, looking at him as if he thought he had gone crazy, "Five thousand dollars goin' to waste! Five—thousand—dollars!" His jaw dropped; he looked not only astonished, but bewildered.

Rodney began to regret that he had been so outspoken.

"Well," said Hank, coming to with a start, "I must be gettin' along home with these-here jars. My old woman will be a-hollerin' fer 'em. She told me I should come right back—" he winked broadly at Rodney—"an' I been gone since ten o'clock! Some tongue-lashin' I'll git! But jest wait till I tell 'er about that five thousand dollars, it'll take her breath so she won't have none left to use on me." His voice was lost in the unearthly din of starting the car. As it leaped forward, Hank leaned out and shouted

a parting reminder. "Don't forget them 'Lady Claires'!" he shrieked, and was gone.

Rodney stood looking after him, but his thoughts were not of "Lady Claires." "Humph!" he ejaculated with a worried look, "here's a development we had not thought of. I must put Tom and Molly wise."

CHAPTER XIV

MUTINY

THE day was sultry, and, exhausted by the violence of their grief, the children slept soundly. Gussie peered cautiously in at them at intervals; but seeing no signs of their awakening, tip-toed silently back to the kitchen and resumed her tasks there. "Bress dey poo' li'l hearts!" she muttered from time to time, wiping her eyes on the corner of her apron.

It was late in the afternoon when Phyllis opened her eyes and stared drowsily up at the shifting shadows on the ceiling, as the window-shades puffed slowly into the room and then were sucked back again by a passing zephyr. As she lay there, dazed and motionless, a strange, unaccountable sense of depression seemed to weigh upon her like the folds of a wet blanket. It was not unlike the feeling one has when suddenly

awakened from a bad dream; and she searched her mind for some plausible explanation of it.

Hilda, over nearer the window, moaned softly in her sleep, and, all at once, Phyllis remembered. This was no dream; it was a fact. Natalie was going away, and there was no help for it.

"It's—it's *rotten!*!" she said to herself, making use of an expression only resorted to in cases of direst need. "I wish I could think of something—some way—" Almost as the wish formed itself, her active mind seemed to see a solution, and creeping over to where Hilda lay, she cuddled down beside her. "Hilda," she whispered in her ear, "wake up. I want to talk to you."

Hilda opened her eyes, and seeing Phyllis's face so close to hers, sat up in alarm. "What's the matter?" she asked in a frightened whisper, "Have they come for Natalie?" Then as she looked past Phyllis and saw the little sleeping form close by, she lay down again with a sigh of relief.

"Hush. Don't wake the others," said Phyllis, her lips close to Hilda's ear. "I've thought of a scheme so we won't have to let Natalie go."

Hilda's brown eyes opened wide with joy. "Oh, Phyllis, you're so clever!" she exclaimed, hugging her sister ecstatically. "But, are you sure it'll work?"

"*Sure!*" declared Phyllis confidently. "Now listen! S'pose when Natalie's mother comes for her, Natalie isn't here. She can't take her away, then, can she?"

"But, Phyll—" began Hilda looking puzzled.

"Wait till I finish," commanded Phyllis in a matter-of-fact tone. "Now, all we've got to do is to see to it that she *isn't* here."

"But how can we do that?"

"Hide her!"

"Mother would never let us do anything like that."

"We musn't let Mother know anything about it."

"Oh, Phyll, we always tell her *everything!*" objected Hilda in dismay.

"Look here, we can explain the whole thing to her afterwards," said Phyllis, "an' she's sure to understand. Anyway, wouldn't it be better to keep a secret from her for a few days than to have to give up Natalie forever?"

"Oh, of course," Hilda's reply, though hesitating, was sincere. "Only—only I *wish*, Philly, there was some other way."

"Well, so do I," said Phyllis, "but there isn't, so I guess we'll just have to go ahead and make the best of it."

They talked about the plan in whispers until it seemed to them perfect in every detail. But a sudden disturbing thought made Hilda exclaim with a tragic air, "O my goodness, we forgot Bobby! What'll we do about him? He can never keep a secret. He's sure to tell Mother or Gussie or *somebody*."

"Leave him to me," said Phyllis darkly. "I'll manage *him*! That is," she added quickly, "unless Mother should try to *make* him tell."

"Oh, she'd never do *that*," said Hilda, "she's too *fair*."

"Well, the sooner we get started, the better," said Phyllis, sighing. "We've got a good chance now while Mother's at the party."

"O my,—so soon?" cried Hilda. "I thought we'd wait till we heard when Natalie's mother was coming, an' then hide her."

"No, that may be too late. We'd better do it right away so as to be on the safe side," replied Phyllis with wise foresight.

So the two plotters woke up Sally and unfolded their plan to her eagerly. She heartily approved of it and added many practical suggestions. Then came the task of telling the two little ones.

They wakened readily when Phyllis spoke their names, and sat up, yawning. "Who wants to hear a secret?" she asked, sitting down on the floor and putting an arm around each. All signs of sleepiness vanished like magic.

"I do," said Natalie promptly.

"Me, too," added Bobby.

Phyllis looked at him thoughtfully. "I—don't know," she said slowly, turning to the other

girls as if in indecision. "Bobby's so little. Do you think we ought to tell him?"

"No," said Sally promptly. "Let's not."

"What do *you* say, Hilda?" asked Phyllis.

Hilda, moved to pity at sight of his downcast face, said, "Why, yes, if he'll promise not to tell."

Bobby looked grateful. In Hilda, he felt that he had at least *one* friend. "I won't tell," he said tremulously. "I'm a big boy. I can keep a secret."

"But you promised not to tell when we had that rubber egg to fool Gussie with, an' you told her right away and spoiled our joke," Phyllis reminded him.

It was useless to deny this accusation; the prosecution had too many witnesses. Bobby's head drooped as if the burden of guilt was too great for his small shoulders. "I was on'y just a little baby, then," he said meekly.

Phyllis could not help laughing. "That was only last week, Bobs," she said.

"Well, I won't tell this time, honest, Phylly," he pleaded.

"All right, then, we'll give you one more chance," Phyllis replied impressively. "But—remember—if you tell *this* time, it's the last, the very, ver-r-ry last secret we ever let you in on."

"I'll merember," smiled Bobby happily. "Now tell us quick."

"Well, listen, then," Phyllis attacked the subject in her usual direct way, "Natalie is going home. They are coming to get her and take her away from us."

"Who?" asked Natalie with a frightened face. "Dulcie an'—an' the man with red hair?"

"I don't know for sure," Phyllis replied mysteriously, "but I guess prob'ly it's only your mother."

Natalie began to cry. "I don't want to go!" she said. Then, with stubborn determination, she added, "I won't go!"

Phyllis shot Hilda a triumphant glance. "I knew you didn't want to go," she said, cuddling her close. "An' we don't want you to go, either. So this is our secret. We know a lovely place where you can go and hide till after your

mother, or whoever comes for you, has gone back home. Then you won't have to go with them. You can live with us *always*, and be our little sister just as you said you wanted to. Won't that be nice?"

"Where is the place?" asked Natalie.

"Just near."

"But I want to stay *here*. I don't want to go any other place *at all*."

Hilda knelt down on the floor and put both arms about the little girl. "Please, Natalie darling, *please* say you'll go," she begged.

"Is it a nice place?" asked Natalie. "Won't I be afraid?"

"Afraid? No, you'll *love* it!" cried the three girls in one breath.

"Can I come back pretty soon?"

"Yes, just as soon as your mother goes," they promised, eagerly.

"But I want to see my mother. She—she's *nice*."

The children looked at each other in despair. Had all their careful planning been in vain?

They were helpless if she refused to go. It was Bobby, in the end, who saved the day.

"She *isn't* nice," he declared solemnly, "'cause she's goin' to take you 'way off, an' we'll never see you any more."

Natalie looked at the circle of anxious faces about her, and her eyes were troubled. "I don't want to go away," she repeated, and her lip began to tremble, "I guess I'd better *hide*."

CHAPTER XV

WHERE IS NATALIE?

Tom called for Molly about six o'clock, and found her flushed and strangely silent, and with a defiant sparkle in her dark eyes. The news that the child for whom a reward of five thousand dollars had been offered was at the Brewsters' had spread like wildfire; and from the moment of her arrival, Molly had been literally bombarded with questions concerning the little girl. Moreover, she had been obliged to listen to all sorts of ridiculous rumors and speculations regarding her, all of which she had accepted good-naturedly, as being only a feminine method of expressing interest. But the thing that she found it hard to understand and excuse, was the attitude of these women in regard to the reward.

"Five thousand dollars!" exclaimed her hostess. "What an extremely lucky little woman you are, Mrs. Brewster!"

"I only wish *I* were in your shoes," sighed another. While one of her closer friends remarked, "It's come just at the psychological moment, Molly. Now you and Tom can join our party to the Yellowstone next month."

Molly flushed. "Oh, we're not going to take the money," she said hastily. "I hope they won't expect us to. We really hadn't given that part of it a second thought."

The silence which greeted this remark, was filled with disapproval. Then Mrs. Smith was heard to say in a careless undertone, "There are not many of us who would feel that we could afford to stick up our noses at that amount of money. I know *I* couldn't."

It was a decided relief to Molly that, at that moment, the maid announced Tom's arrival, for the atmosphere was becoming somewhat strained. So she hurriedly made her adieux and ran out to the waiting car.

"What do you think of your shining chariot?" asked Tom as she settled herself in the seat beside him.

"It's marvellous!" she cried enthusiastically. "I wouldn't have believed it could ever look like this. I should think you and Rod would be all in."

"Not a bit of it," laughed Tom. "We were pretty hot by the time we had finished, but we each took a shower, and if he feels as fit as I do, he could start in and do it all over again." And, indeed, his looks bore out his statement, as he sat, erect and smiling in his immaculate white flannels.

"You *do* look spiffy, dear," said Molly, giving his arm a squeeze. "Now, tell me, have you had any word from New York?"

Tom drew a telegram out of his pocket and handed it to her. "This came about an hour ago, just before I left," he said. "I started early, as I had an errand in town."

Molly read the message with a quickly beating heart.

"Will arrive Armitage Saturday 2:38 P.M.

"*Gloria Gray.*"

"Oh," she exclaimed a trifle breathlessly. "that must be her mother! I wonder what she's like."

"If we can judge by Natalie, she must be very much all right," was Tom's reply.

Molly made no answer; she fell silent for so long a time that Tom was at a loss to account for it. Then, to his amazement, she burst out vehemently, "How I do loathe people who put money value above everything else!"

Tom was amused at such an outburst from his usually gentle Molly, but he concealed his feelings, and merely asked, "Who's the offender?"

"Oh, *everybody!*" she flashed back at him, "everybody at the party. They couldn't think of anything except the reward,—how much it would mean to us,—what we could buy with the money. Why, I actually believe they think we're sort of *queer* not to accept it."

"Rod has an idea that the size of the reward might tempt dishonest people; that we ought to be on our guard," said Tom. "He says he had a talk with Hank Allen, and Hank was nearly

bowled over when he heard that we weren't going to claim it. In a larger place, there might be cause for alarm, I admit; but here, where we know everybody,—why, its absurd."

"You mean that some one might steal Natalie so as to claim the reward?" cried Molly in alarm.

"Why, honey, don't take it so to heart," replied Tom, surprised at her distress. "I'm sure there's nothing to worry about."

But his words fell on deaf ears. "If anything like that should happen. I never could forgive myself," said Molly, with white lips.

As they turned in at the drive a moment later, their hearts sank, for no welcoming figures came in sight, and the unaccustomed silence seemed portentous.

"I feel in my bones that something dreadful has happened," said Molly under her breath.

"Oh, those prognosticating bones!" jibed Tom in an effort to allay her fears. But the smile faded from his face and he stiffened in his seat as a long-drawn, quavering wail came to their ears from the innermost regions of the house.

Molly clutched Tom's arm with both hands. "That's Gussie!" she cried, springing from the car almost before it had stopped, and starting on a run for the house. Tom followed swiftly, but he could not keep pace with her flying feet.

When she reached the kitchen door, Molly stopped short, for to her bewildered vision, the room seemed a blur of dusky forms and faces. But gradually these resolved themselves into definite shapes, and she saw before her only Gussie, Maudie May, and the latter's mother, Nettie, the long-suffering wife of Gussie's son, George.

Gussie sat at the table, her head buried in her arms, her body shaken with grief; while Maudie May stroked her heaving shoulders in a vain attempt to comfort her.

"Don' cry, Gran'mammy," she was saying as Molly entered. "It ain't noways *you* fault,—is it, Mom?" She rolled imploring eyes at her mother who, silent and motionless as a graven image, occupied a chair on the far side of the room.

Thus appealed to, Nettie made answer in a dead, unemotional voice, "No, it ain't her fault." And added as an afterthought, "It ain't nobody's fault but *his'n*."

"What's happened, Gussie?" cried Molly advancing into the room.

Gussie's reply was too wildly agitated to be intelligible; and Molly was relieved to hear Tom's cheerful, quieting voice at her elbow, saying, "Come now, Gussie, pull yourself together and let's hear all about it."

At the sound of his voice, Gussie ceased her lamentations and sat up, wiping her eyes.

"I 'clare to goodness, Mr. Tom," she said solemnly, "I ain't had de leastes' notion dis thing gwine happen, else I been on de lookout."

Tom knew from long experience that Gussie would have to tell the story in her own way, so he said as patiently as he could, "What thing, Gussie?"

"Why, all dis business 'bout de reward," answered Gussie. "You see, *I* didn't know nothin' 'bout it. Nobody done tell me dere *was*

no such thing. Den long 'bout ha'-past fouah, mah son, Gawge come in, an' he say to me, 'I needs money putty bad,' an' I say to him, 'What you come to me fooh? I ain't got no money. Go git a job ef you needs money.' Den he say, 'You *has* got money. You has got as good as five thousand dollahs right unner dis yere roof.' I say, 'What you mean, Gawge, is you gone plum' crazy?' An' he say, 'Dere's a big reward for dat li'l gal what you got here. You let me have de li'l gal an' I give you half de money.' I say, 'Wheah-all you heah dem pack o' lies?' An' he say, 'It ain't no lies. It's de truf, 'cause it come ovah de radium down to Mike MacDowell's pool room.' Den I say, 'You git outen mah kitchen, you wuthless, lazy, good-foh-nothin' niggah!'" As she reached this part of her recital, Gussie rose dramatically. "Den he say, 'Aw right, I gits her fooh myse'f, den,' an' he hurry fast out froo de do'. An' I goes up to waken de chilluns an' to see dat dey stays into de house till you gits back. But when I gits up to de bedroom,—Lawsy! lawsy!—dey is gone!" She

covered her face with her apron and began to moan.

To each of Gussie's statements, Nettie and Maudie May nodded solemn confirmation; and presently Gussie recovered enough to resume her narrative.

"Den," she said, "I run quick an' call Mr. Rodney. He just shavin' himse'f in de baffroom, an' soon as he heah me, out he come runnin' wid his face all soapsuds, but he don' wait foh nothin' when I tell him what happen. He jus' frow down his razor an' grab a towel an' wipe de soap offen his face, an' den he go out froo dat do' like he had wings onto his feet. Dat was mos' an hour ago, an'—an' I ain' seed hide nor hair o' any one o' 'em sence."

"Suppose we go down to the orchard," suggested Tom. "They might have gone there. And don't look so frightened, honey. Remember, Rodney's on the job."

"Yes," said Molly dully, "but he's been gone an hour, according to Gussie. What could be keeping him if—if everything is all right?"

"He may be just playing with them," answered Tom with a hopefulness he was very far from feeling.

Together they sped down the sloping lawn towards the entrance to the apple orchard which, fronting on the Turnpike, was reached by a gateway cut in the hedge. As they drew near this, the murmur of voices reached their ears.

"They're there!" cried Molly joyfully. "Oh, but what a fright! I'm fairly weak!" And the laugh which accompanied her words was somewhat hysterical.

"Come here, you rascals!" called Tom. "Come and give an account of yourselves. You've put us all in a pretty panic. You've—" He stopped; for as the children filed slowly through the gateway, he saw that there were only four.

"Where's Natalie?" called Molly sharply.

For a moment no one spoke. There was an air of conscious guilt about the sturdy little figures confronting them. Then Phyllis answered bluntly, "Gone."

"Gone where?" asked Molly in bewilderment.

"Oh—just *gone*," said Sally with a furtive, sidelong glance.

Then Bobby threw out his hands in a gesture of finality. "Gone," he echoed in sepulchral tones, "Gone—gone—gone!"

CHAPTER XVI

AMOS INTERVENES

IT was a subdued and thoroughly dejected family that gathered in the living-room that evening; and for the first time in many months, the customary “sing” was omitted. But none of them—not even Bobby, whose spirits ordinarily rebounded from all depressing influences with the lightness of a brand-new rubber ball, had the heart for it that night. It was a relief to all concerned when bedtime came, and the children departed without their usual protests for “just a few minutes more.”

Molly accompanied them as usual; but tonight the evening ritual was brief, and when she came downstairs she looked wan and tired and altogether hopeless.

“Well, what luck did you have?” asked Tom, laying down his paper.

"None whatever," she replied as she threw herself upon the sofa with a discouraged sigh. "I can't make any more impression upon them than on so many rocks. They *won't* tell where Natalie is; and I can't make them understand how dreadful it will be for her mother when she comes to-morrow and finds her gone. It's pure selfishness on their part. I don't know *what* we're going to do."

Tom took out his pipe and began to fill it absent-mindedly. "Hilda's eyes are the most pathetic things I ever saw," he said as he struck a match and held it to the bowl. "They fairly haunt me."

"Yes, poor dear. She's dying to tell me everything," said Molly sadly. "To-night she put her arms around my neck and whispered to me not to worry, that everything would be all right."

"Don't you think if you used a little moral suasion on Bobby you could get some information?" asked Tom.

Molly sat up briskly. "Oh, I *couldn't* do that!" she cried. "It would be taking an unfair

advantage to attack them in their weakest quarter. No, I don't want any information that has to be dragged out of them by force or strategy. It must come of their own free will, not by any act of mine."

"Well, at least we know that she hasn't been stolen," said Tom.

"Yes," agreed Molly, "and that, in itself, is something of a consolation. She must be somewhere close at hand, though where, I cannot imagine. And that's what frightens me so, the thought that we are powerless to protect her. George may discover where she is and get her, after all."

Rodney interrupted with a laugh. "I don't think you need be afraid that George will give any further trouble," he said. "When I caught him this afternoon skulking about in the underbrush down near the brook where the children play, I took pains to throw such a scare into him that he's going to watch his step for many days to come. I left him blubbering like a baby, and fairly pale about the gills."

"But there are others who might have the same wicked plans," said Molly.

"Yes," Tom assented, "but I have great confidence in Phyllis's judgment. She has a good head on her shoulders, and you may be sure that, loving Natalie as she does, she would never let her stay where there was a chance of her coming to any harm."

"But she is so young to judge of that," replied Molly, "and so innocent of what dangers there may be."

"I'm not worrying so much about Natalie, for I feel sure that she is safe," remarked Tom, "but how are we going to explain matters to her mother to-morrow?"

"Yes, that's what I've been asking myself all along," responded Molly, wretchedly.

"Let's hope they may be more ready to 'fess up in the morning," said Tom cheerfully. "A good night's rest may have a softening influence."

He turned again to his paper, while Molly listlessly picked up a bit of sewing, and Rodney, seating himself at the piano, began softly to im-

provise. The simple melody was as soothing as a mother's lullaby. Molly let her head sink back against the chair cushions and closed her tired eyes. How well Rodney understood what it was she needed!

Suddenly there came an excited exclamation from Tom. "Listen to this!" he cried, springing to his feet. And as the music ceased, he read aloud with dramatic emphasis, "Ainslee Carruthers announced to-day that he has selected a play by an unknown author as a vehicle in which to star Susanne Fitch during the coming season."

"Oh, Rod, it's yours!" cried Molly rapturously.

"It sounds encouraging," was Rodney's comment. "But—pshaw! he may have a dozen plays by unknown authors. I'm not going to pin any hopes on that until I hear from Carruthers, himself. Though, naturally, I can't help hoping—"

His remarks were cut short by the metallic jangle of the telephone. Molly crossed the room to the small stand where the instrument stood.

"Hello," she said, a trifle absently, for her thoughts were all with Rodney.

"Hello," it was a husky voice which answered her, "Is this Mis' Brewster?"

"Yes," answered Molly. "This is Mrs. Brewster speaking."

"Well, this is Amos Runkle."

"Good evening, Amos. How are you?" asked Molly in surprise.

"I'm well, thank'ee, ma'am," he answered; then in a cautious voice, he asked, "Is the children anywheres about, ma'am?"

"No, Amos. They're all in bed and asleep this long time," answered Molly, "Is there any message I can give them in the morning?"

"No, thank'ee, ma'am. I jest wanted to make sure they wasn't round so's to hear what I'm a-goin' to say. 'Cause I wanted you to know," —he paused to clear his throat—"little sissy's here."

"Oh, Amos, *where* did you find her?" Molly's eyes were dancing as she turned to smile at Tom. "Natalie!" she breathed.

Amos coughed apologetically. "Well, you see, I didn't jest exactly *find* her, ma'am," he said. "When I druv back from town this afternoon, the children was a-watching fer me in the road. I allus drive in for the paper, long about four o'clock, an' they figured I'd be comin' back about five. So there they was, all drawed up in a line a-waitin'. Minute I seed 'em, I knowed there was somethin' amiss. An' when they told me 'bout little sissy, how her mother was comin' to take her away, an' how bad they felt at losin' her, an' asts me would I please keep her for a few days till her mother went back home again, I—well, I know I hadn't orto, but I hadn't the heart to refuse 'em. But jest the same, I thought it wasn't right that *you* should worry, ma'am."

"Oh, Amos, thank you!" cried Molly gratefully. "I can't tell you what a load is lifted from my heart."

Amos chuckled; then his husky old voice continued, "An' if ye don't mind, Mis' Brewster, I'd count it a real favor if you wouldn't let on to the

children that I tattled. I wouldn't have 'em think I wasn't square."

"No, Amos, I won't tell," promised Molly.

Amos expressed his gratitude; then he added, "Sabina, my old woman, is clean daffy about her. They're settin' on the floor together, now, a-cuttin' out paper dolls." He stopped abruptly and rang off.

Molly turned from the telephone with a radiant face. "No wonder they assured me she was safe. She's with Amos and Sabina," she announced happily.

"What a relief!" cried Rodney in such a heartfelt tone that both Tom and Molly realized for the first time how worried he had been.

"I told you Phyllis had a good head," said Tom as he rose and stretched himself. "Now, I suppose I'd better get out the old Packarderm and run over and get the young lady."

"No, Tom, you mustn't!" Molly's tone was so sharply imperative that Tom looked at her in surprise.

"Why not?" he asked defensively.

"Well, for one thing, I just this minute promised Amos that we wouldn't let the children know he'd told."

"That's easily managed. Amos is going to sell me a couple of pigeons. I can drive over after them this evening and, incidentally, discover Natalie. They need never know."

Molly walked over to one of the windows and stood looking out into the night. From the pathetic droop of her shoulders, Tom knew that there was something wrong. He went and stood beside her, slipping an arm about her waist. "I won't go if you'd rather I wouldn't, honey," he said, "but I thought you'd *want* her back."

She leaned her head against him wearily. "Oh, I do! I do!" she exclaimed, "but not that way, dear. Don't you see that if you go and get her, that will spoil everything? It would be 'putting one over on them,' as they say. Somehow, they must be made to see and undo the wrong they have done. But how can I make them see it? How *can* I?" She wrung her hands together in despair, and continued in a

low voice, almost as if thinking aloud, "I wonder if my theories *are* all wrong; if I *have* trusted too much to their sense of what was right. I wonder if Mrs. Smith's way is better, after all."

Tom listened without interrupting. He knew that she must fight this out alone.

"I have always tried to play fair with them," continued Molly, "to show them what was right and then leave them to make their own decisions. But they've never been like this before, —so hard, so stubborn, so unyielding. They're not perfect, of course. They're cross, sometimes, and thoughtless and careless and aggravating and everything else that healthy, normal children are; but down at heart, they've always been all right. I've believed in them, believed that when it came to an issue, they would always do the square and decent thing; and they've never failed me, until now." Her voice broke.

Tom drew her close and held her there until she had grown calmer.

"They will not fail you now, dear heart," he whispered with his lips against her hair.

CHAPTER XVII

RODNEY MAKES A DISCOVERY

THE doleful strains of "The Storm of Life" wakened the Brewsters early next morning.

"O my goodness!" groaned Molly to her reflection in the mirror of her dressing-table as she twisted up her hair, "aren't things gloomy enough without having to listen to *that*? I must hurry and find out what's the trouble."

So, after a depressingly silent breakfast, she went to the kitchen where Gussie, her face furrowed with care, was filling the air with sounds of woe, as she wailed:

"Lord, if I put my trust in Thee, will you hide Thou me?
"Lord, if I put my trust in Thee, will you hide Thou me?"

Molly walked over to the sink where the breakfast dishes were draining and, picking up a towel, began to dry the plates. She did not say

a word, knowing full well that Gussie would not unburden her soul until she felt the urge to do so. Meanwhile, for several stanzas the song continued unbroken. Then, Gussie, as though but just aware of Molly's presence, snatched the towel from her hands, exclaiming, "Foh lawsy sakes, Mis' Molly, don't you wipe dem dishes! I 'clare to goodness, I's so flabjurated dis maw-nin' I don' scacey know whar I is at!"

"What's wrong, Gussie?" asked Molly with ready sympathy.

"Trouble, trouble, trouble!" was Gussie's dolorous reply. "'Pears lak' dere ain't no end to it. Seems, sometimes, dat trouble's jes' lak' fleas onto a dawg,—jumps outa nowhere right onto you back an' gives you a nip. De mo' you tries to git away, de mo' dey bites." She shook her head sadly.

Molly waited with patience for her to proceed.

"It's mah son, Gawge," Gussie announced mournfully, "he been 'rested."

"Arrested? Why, what for? What has he done?" gasped Molly.

"Ain't done nothin', Mis' Molly," said Gussie solemnly. "Dey come fooh him las' night an' 'rested him, 'cause dey say he knowed som'p'n 'bout de robbery ovah to Curtiss Plains las' Wednesday. You 'member dey held up de drug store an' took 'bout fifty dollahs outen de cash registah."

"Oh, yes," replied Molly, "I remember hearing about that. When did you say it happened?"

"Las' Wednesday, 'bout two o'clock in de afternoon."

Molly thought hard for a moment; then she said, "Why, that was the day before my party. George was here all day, mowing the lawn and clipping the hedge. He couldn't have been concerned in it!"

Gussie nodded gravely. "Yassum, I 'members dat, too. But when Gawge tell dat to de officer, it don' do no good. He take 'im an' put 'im in de lock-up, an' Nettie, she tell me dat Gawge is jes' posturated wid shame about it.— Oh, mah boy, mah po' boy!" Gussie covered her

face with her wrinkled hands and began to weep.

Molly patted the bent shoulders. "But he didn't do it, Gussie," she said soothingly. "We all know that and can testify, if necessary. I'll tell Tom, and I know he'll go right over to Curtiss Plains and explain matters to the authorities."

Gussie wiped her eyes. "Oh, Mis' Molly, I be so happy if Mr. Tom would do dat foh me," she cried gratefully; and she resumed her work with a brighter face. And presently she remarked with a virtuous gleam in her eye. "I reckon dis 'sperience gwine to larn Gawge a lesson. I 'specs he been so scared dat now he turn ovah a new leaf an' git religion."

Molly smiled dubiously. She did not share Gussie's belief in George's reformation. "One night in jail won't hurt him," she said to herself, remembering all the trouble he had caused them; and her sympathies were less with the delinquent George than with his sorrowing old mother.

And so it came about that instead of going to

Armitage to meet the 2:38 as he had planned, Tom donned his knickers and walked the three miles to Curtiss Plains to see what he could do in the matter of effecting George's release; so the task of meeting Natalie's mother, fell to Rodney.

As he drove through the placid, elm-arched streets of Armitage, Rodney had to admit to himself that the errand was not to his liking. He experienced none of Molly's curiosity in regard to the woman's personality. In fact, when he came to analyze his feelings, he found that the only emotion of which he was conscious, was one of decided antagonism; almost as if he resented her claiming her own child. "I'm as bad as the kids, in that respect," he soliloquized, as he drew up at the station platform and saw with satisfaction that the train was already in sight.

He parked his car in the rear of the building, and strolled around to the front just as the train pulled in. "Lucky thing Armitage isn't a thriving metropolis," he mused as the passengers began to straggle out, "I might have difficulty

in identifying the lady.” Then, in an instant, all thoughts of Natalie’s mother were put to flight by the vision of a slender, black-robed figure that he knew. Scarcely able to believe his eyes, Rodney moved towards her as if in a dream, while the girl, for she looked hardly more than that, after a moment of amazed scrutiny, ran to him with both hands outstretched. “Oh, Mr. Harrington,” she cried, “will you help me?—I am looking for a family named Brewster.”

“Why—why—that’s *me!*” stammered Rodney, growing ungrammatical in his surprise. “At least, I’m part of it, that is to say, I represent it. I’m its brother-in-law.”

Gloria Gray’s long-fringed blue eyes opened wide. “Then—then *you* have my little girl!” she gasped.

“*Your* little girl?” echoed Rodney.

“Yes, Natalie.”

Then, suddenly, they both laughed. “This certainly calls for explanations on both sides,” remarked Gloria as he guided her towards the car. “But tell me about her. Is she well?

Has she missed me? Does she know I'm coming?" Her questions fairly tumbled over each other in her eagerness.

"She couldn't be finer," Rodney answered as they climbed aboard.

He drove home slowly; they had much to talk about.

"You must be thinking very strange things of me," said Gloria when they had started, "so I may as well begin at the beginning and then everything will be clear. Eight years ago, when I first went on the stage, I took my mother's maiden name; so that's why the public knows me as Susanne Fitch. Two years later, I married Hamilton Gray. You've heard of him, no doubt."

"Who hasn't?" answered Rodney, "with the reputation he has made in polo."

"Yes, everybody knew him," Gloria replied half-sadly, "if not for his game, then for his millions. They called him the Million-Dollar Kid, you know."

Rodney nodded.

"He was injured, fatally, in the last international match in England, late in June," said Gloria.

"I read of it in the Paris papers," remarked Rodney quietly.

"Our marriage was not happy," she continued after a short pause, "we were just two crazy kids who didn't know our own minds. We were never suited to each other. After the second year we rarely saw each other. And yet, for all of that, when the end came, he wanted me. I reached him just before he died."

Rodney, stealing a glance at her, saw that her cheeks were wet. "Please don't think you have to tell me this," he said.

"Oh, but I want to," she replied earnestly. "I want you to know. It's—it's only that I've been through so much these last few weeks that I find it hard to talk. You see, the cable came just the closing week of my engagement. My understudy took my part and Uncle Ainslee arranged to go with me. He has been so wonderful through all this trouble,—I don't know what

I should have done without him.—I couldn't take Natalie very well; so I left her behind in Dulcie's care. Dulcie had been my maid for three years, quiet, middle-aged, respectable and, apparently, perfectly trustworthy. So I didn't worry about leaving Natalie in her charge. Imagine my feelings, then, when I returned three weeks later and found them both gone, and nobody could tell me where! The doorman at the Apartment said the last he saw of them they were getting into a taxi at the corner. From then on, there wasn't a trace of them. It was as if they had vanished into thin air. Of course, I was nearly frantic; but I remembered that Dulcie had a sister in the Bronx, and I thought they might be there. So I looked her up, and then discovered that she was in trouble, too. A letter had just come from Dulcie, and she was in *Montreal*. Her sister let me read the letter, and I shall never forget it. I think the woman's crazy."

"It's undoubtedly the most charitable thing to think," interposed Rodney.

"In her letter, Dulcie said that for several years she had been giving her wages to a man named Alec to whom she was engaged," continued Gloria. "When I was called away, he saw his chance to persuade her to go away with him. He had bought a car with some of her money, and he knew she had a tidy little bank account up in Albany, where she had lived before she came to me. He evidently wanted to hang on to her until he could get his hands on *that*. So he told the poor, foolish old thing to go to Albany and draw out her money, and he would meet her there with the car, and they would go on a sort of glorified honeymoon to Canada. Well, she followed his instructions in all but one respect, she took Natalie along. This spoiled everything, for he saw the chance of a kidnaping charge looming up ahead of him; so he told Dulcie that it was 'all off' unless she got rid of 'the brat'. And Dulcie, not knowing what else to do under the circumstances, simply set her down on a lonely country road and left her there."

"It's the most outrageous thing I ever heard of," said Rodney feelingly; and Gloria, heartily agreeing, went on with her story.

"They went to Montreal, and there he abandoned her as, of course, any one might know he would. Then he lit out with the car; and she, frightened and penniless, wrote the whole story to her sister."

"And it was only Thursday that you read this letter," commented Rodney. "You have done some pretty speedy work."

"Yes. Uncle Ainslee said the way to get the quickest action was to have a description of her broadcast, so we put the matter into the hands of the Missing Persons Bureau. It seemed like an answer to prayer when Mr. Brewster's telegram came so promptly, and it was such a reassuring one. It said she was safe and happy and with people who loved her. He can never know how much that message meant to me." Her eyes filled as she spoke.

"We've all lost our hearts to Natalie," declared Rodney, "so much so, in fact, that I am placed

in the embarrassing position of having to confess that she isn't with us any more."

"What!" Terror leaped into the blue eyes, so like, so very like, Natalie's own. "Don't tell me you have let somebody else have her!"

"No," said Rodney gently. "It's only that she's staying temporarily with a nice old couple that we know and, if you say so, I'll drive you there at once. But when I've explained matters, I'm hoping you will understand our point of view, and be kind enough to humor us in our treatment of the affair."

"It would be poor gratitude that couldn't promise that," was Gloria's reply.

"My sister has four children," Rodney began, "as good, healthy-minded, normal kids as you'd find anywhere. They have been brought up carefully; but my sister has very decided ideas about training children; she has never *forced* them to do things as so many mothers do. She has told them what was right and then just put it up to them to do the square thing. And it's worked well. They *are* good kids." He said

the last defensively, more as if he were answering an argument, rather than merely stating a fact.

"I'm sure of it," replied Gloria Gray.

"Well, they all fell hard for Natalie the minute they laid eyes on her," he continued, "You see,—my own little girl—" —he hesitated, finding it difficult to speak of things so near his heart—"my little Jean—died not very long ago."

"Oh, you are married, then?"

"My wife is dead," replied Rodney, simply.

Gloria laid her hand upon his arm in a quick, unconscious gesture of sympathy. "Forgive me," she said softly.

Rodney stared straight ahead and went on speaking, but his voice had grown husky, "Natalie is very like my little Jean. We all noticed it. And when she came to us, she seemed to fill Jean's place in the children's hearts. They adopted her instantly, and *absolutely*."

Gloria was deeply moved. "It seems almost as if she had been guided to your door," she said.

"Well," Rodney took up his story again, "when the children heard that some one was coming to take Natalie away, they simply wouldn't stand for it. They took matters into their own hands and hid her with this old couple. We were all frantic until we found out where she was, but we probably shouldn't have known to this day if old Amos hadn't volunteered the information. And it's just here that the complication arises, for, you see, we're not supposed to know where she is. My sister has argued, coaxed and pleaded; the children will *not* tell, and so—you see—"

Gloria interrupted him. "To think they love my Natalie like that!" she cried with an odd little quaver in her voice while her eyes grew very large and bright. Then to Rodney's utter bewilderment, she threw back her head and laughed. Her dimples were enchanting. "The darling rogues!" she cried, "of course, we mustn't let them know we've found her. They must be the ones to tell. The problem is how to make them."

Rodney was plainly relieved at her understanding of the situation. "They're selfish little beasts," he declared. "They don't give a thought as to how *you* might feel about it."

Gloria smiled mysteriously. "I'll make them understand," she said after a thoughtful silence. "Just leave them to me. I have a plan. And now, Mr. Harrington, tell me what they're like."

"Well," said Rodney, "Hilda, the eldest, is eleven, and she's all heart, the dearest little soul that ever lived; soft and yielding, a good deal of a dreamer, the exact opposite of Phyllis who is nine and, undoubtedly, the ringleader in this, as she is in everything. She is a capable child with a keen mind, somewhat stubborn (they all are that) but generous and affectionate. Sally comes next; she has just turned seven. She loves the good things of this world a bit too well, I fear; is rather inclined to be selfish, but is loyal and truthful to the last degree. Bobby, who is only three, is too young to have developed any very decided characteristics, aside from a bulldog tenacity of purpose. He just tags along

after the others and does as they do. But whatever their faults and failings may be, you can bank on this, they all *adore* their mother."

Gloria turned to him, and mischief was dancing in her eyes. "Is there any way that I could see them before I meet their mother?" she asked. "Let me go to them alone. I think that would be best." And under her breath, Rodney heard her say again, "The darlings!"

CHAPTER XVIII

NATALIE'S MOTHER

RODNEY did not turn in between the gray stone pillars which marked the entrance to the Brewster place, but drove on past them and into the apple orchard where he parked the car; and, together, the two conspirators stole through the hedge and up the lawn to the side of the house where the playroom wing was located.

"They're pretty sure to be in there," said Rodney, pointing to it.

Gloria stepped forward to the door through which came the sound of children's voices. She paused there for a moment, looking in; then tapped, and vanished from his sight. Then Rodney, without the slightest scruple in regard to eavesdropping, stationed himself close to one of the windows, in the shadow of a tall syringa

bush, where he could see and hear everything that went on inside.

It had been a hard day for the children. Being very much depressed by a sense of their guilt, they had found it well-nigh impossible to take more than a passing interest in things. Fits of gloom had alternated with unsuccessful attempts to play; and after what seemed to them an interminable morning, they had gathered in the playroom where they now sat, dejected and unhappy, about a table at one side of the long room.

"I wish 'twas all over an' we could have Natalie back," pouted Sally. "We haven't had a bit of fun all day."

"Fun!" exploded Phyllis. "It's been *awful*. This day has seemed as long as a week, an' it isn't over yet."

"No, the hardest part is coming," was Sally's cheerful reply.

"The hardest part is having Mother feel so bad," said Hilda.

"O my goodness!" exclaimed Phyllis crossly,

"can't anybody say anything cheerful or pleasant? I didn't know it would be like this. I'm sick of the whole business!"

"So'm I," said Sally with a deep sigh, "but Mrs. Gray'll be here soon. Hasn't Uncle Roddy gone for her?"

"Yes," answered Phyllis. "I saw him drive away, but the car hasn't come back yet. We'll be sure to hear it when it does."

"What you going to say to her when she *does* come, Phyll?" asked Hilda.

Phyllis looked at her coldly. "You needn't think for one minute that I'm going to do all the talking," she replied. "You're in this just as much as I am."

"But you always think of such good things to say," said Hilda flatteringly. "I always get so panicky."

Phyllis began to kick at the leg of the table moodily; and Bobby who, hitherto, had taken no part in the discussion, now stepped boldly into the breach. "I'll do the talkin' when she comes," he declared in a shrill, determined voice,

"I'll jus' say, 'Git, now, git!' like Gussie does to Gawge."

The small braggart looked about him for applause, but none came; for at that moment, they all heard a light step outside, a tap upon the open door, and there, framed in the opening, stood a girlish figure dressed in black.

The sunlight fell upon the soft tendrils of hair beneath the somber little hat, turning them to purest gold; it rested on the fresh young cheeks, the smiling lips. There was no mistaking the identity of this person; the eyes that looked at them were Natalie's. With a low laugh, she stepped quickly into the room. "Ah, here you are!" she cried; then, as her searching eyes failed in their quest, she stopped as if surprised. "Natalie!" she called breathlessly, "Natalie, darling, where are you?"

There was no answer. Rising slowly to their feet, the children gazed at her with an admiration they made no effort to conceal. Was *this* the woman whose coming they had feared? They had never dreamed that she might be so

young, so beautiful, so altogether lovely; and at sight of her their unwarranted aversion began to slip away.

Hilda was the first to find her tongue. With the instinct of a hostess, she pushed a chair forward, saying shyly, "Won't you sit down?"

Gloria did so wearily. "I—I thought my little girl was here," she said with a pathetic catch in her voice, "but there must be some mistake. Can any of you children tell me where she is?"

There was a dead silence. Phyllis moistened her lips nervously and tried to think of something to say. The other children, embarrassed at her failure to reply, turned and gazed out of the window. Gloria looked from one face to another as if trying to read their thoughts; then she sprang to her feet with a despairing cry.

"Something has happened to her!" she moaned, "I see it in your faces." She began to pace about the room, wringing her hands and weeping. "Why didn't some one *tell* me," she sobbed, "instead of letting me find it out like this? Why did they send for me and tell me she

was here? Oh—it was cruel!—cruel!” Her voice sank almost to a whisper; she seemed to be talking to herself, unaware of the four troubled faces watching her. But suddenly she whirled upon them angrily. “Can none of you *speak?*” she cried, “Can none of you tell me what has happened?”

Phyllis stepped forward, but she seemed to have lost her usual air of assurance. “Nothing has happened to her, Mrs. Gray,” she faltered, “only—she isn’t here—just now.”

“What do you mean?” asked Gloria in a hard voice. “The telegram certainly said that she was here.”

“She *was* here,” interposed Sally, coming bravely to Phyllis’s aid.

“She’s gone away,” said Bobby, putting in his oar. With his feet planted very far apart, he stood in front of Gloria and looked her squarely in the eye, as he made this announcement.

“Gone?” repeated Gloria.

He nodded vigorously.

"But I don't understand," she said with a puzzled look, "if nothing has happened to her, why all this mystery? Why don't you tell me where she is so I can go and get her? What *right* have you to keep me in suspense like this?" Then her voice rose to an hysterical pitch, and she exclaimed with a vehemence which startled them, "No—no—no,—you are keeping something back. Something terrible has happened and you are afraid to tell me. But anything—*anything* is better than this uncertainty."

With a quick, graceful movement, she fell on her knees in front of them, holding out her arms in supplication. "Tell me where she is," she begged, her voice tense with feeling, "I want her so,—my little love,—my baby." Tears glistened on her cheeks.

Hilda looked beseechingly at Phyllis. "Oh, Phylly," she quavered, "Oh, Phylly!" But Phyllis turned her back in stubborn silence, and resisted the appeal.

"I have travelled so far," the pleading voice went on, "so far, in the hope of finding my dar-

ling; and now—now—” Sobs seemed to choke her; she held a handkerchief to her eyes.

Hilda could stand no more. “I guess I’d better get Mother,” she said, hurrying from the room.

“Well, *that* got Hilda,” said Rodney to himself; and as he became aware of a mist before his eyes, he added with amusement, “I guess it got me, too.”

Gloria Gray rose slowly to her feet and dried her eyes. Then she sat down on a chair and drew Sally to her gently, running her hand caressingly over her smooth, dark hair. “I wonder,” she said gravely, “if you know what it is to want a thing so much that it aches, right *here*.” She laid her hand above her heart.

“Oh, yes,” replied Sally earnestly, “that’s the way we all want Rinty. We want him so awfully much it *hurts*.”

“Well, that’s the way I want my little girl.”

Sally regarded her soberly. “But *we* want Natalie, too,” she said. “We want her for our little sister.”

"But you all have each other, and I have no one in all the world but her."

Bobby stepped closer and laid one hand upon her knee. "No one—not no one at *all?*" he queried anxiously.

"No one at all," said Gloria Gray.

Sally dropped her eyes. It was plain to see she was giving the matter serious consideration.

"Suppose you had been given a wonderful gift," Gloria continued, "something that was *priceless*—" (Sally felt of the birthday ring upon her finger)—"and through no fault of yours—no *conscious* fault, that is—you lost it. How would you feel if some one found it and refused to give it back?"

Sally flushed. "I'd be good an' mad," she said.

"Yes," agreed Bobby, "an' I'd be mad, too, I would."

Gloria smiled at the little fellow's earnestness.

"We-e-ell, I'd just as lief tell where Natalie is," Sally confessed with a shy glance, "only—only I wouldn't go back on the others, not for any-

thing." And she raised her head with a determined gesture.

"Sally has surrendered," commented Rodney with a good deal of satisfaction. "It's up to Phyllis now."

But at this psychological moment, Molly entered with tear-stained Hilda clinging to her arm.

With outstretched hands she hurried toward her guest, her lips parted in a welcoming smile. But the smile faded, and she paused a bit uncertainly as she saw that Gloria was regarding her with cold, unfriendly eyes.

"Ah,—Mrs. Brewster," said Gloria rising to her feet, "there are a few things I would like to say to you."

Molly's hands dropped to her sides; she was completely taken aback by the tone of the other woman's voice. "Oh, I am so—so sorry," she stammered wretchedly.

"Sorry!" blazed Gloria Gray, "Sorry!" Then she threw back her head and laughed. It was not a pretty laugh to hear; it was cruel and

altogether heartless. The children looked at her with frightened eyes, instinctively drawing closer to their mother.

"You talk of being sorry," cried Gloria passionately, "you, with your home and your husband and children; you, who with all of these would plot to keep my little one from me!" She spoke rapidly, as if fearful of interruption, her words fairly tumbling over each other.

A look of wonder leaped into Molly's eyes, a look of sudden understanding. She almost smiled; and Gloria continued tensely, "Don't think I'm blind. I saw through your scheme as soon as I found she wasn't here. And now you—you—" she pointed her finger accusingly at Molly.

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" It was Phyllis's voice, and with each repetition of the word, she stamped her foot. She stepped before her mother as if to shield her from the torrent of abuse, facing Gloria Gray with flashing eyes.

"You shan't blame Mother," she cried hotly, "she had nothing whatever to do with it. She

doesn't even know where Natalie is. It's us—just *us!*" And flinging both arms about Molly's waist, she buried her face in the folds of her dress.

"Mother," she sobbed, "darling, darling Mother!"

"The last barrier is down," was Rodney's mental comment as he left his post of vantage at the window, and strolled down to get the car. He knew full well that his presence in the playroom at such a moment would only be embarrassing.

Bobby, meanwhile, had surveyed the scene with disapproval. He was at a loss to account for all these tears; for, to him, the case looked simple, and easy of adjustment. With an air of scorn, he turned to quit the room.

"Oh, fiddle!" he remarked disgustedly, "Oh, fiddle! I guess I better twy to find Amos and tell him to bwing Natty back."

CHAPTER XIX

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

WHEN Tom returned from Curtiss Plains a short time later, in company with a subdued and chastened George, he found that a surprising change had taken place in the atmosphere of his home. The gloomy house from which he had departed that morning had vanished and, in its place, there stood a veritable palace of mirth. Sounds of excited chatter drew him to the side verandah, and as he rounded the corner of the house, loud shouts of welcome greeted him.

Natalie, from her throne on her mother's knee, spied him first. "Here comes my Daddy Brewster!" she announced loudly; and, at her words, there was a stampede of children in his direction.

"Listen, Father, listen!" they shouted, each eager to be first to impart the interesting news.



SHE LAID HER HAND UPON THE GOLDEN HEAD.
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As he came up the steps with the noisy flock clinging to him like so many little burs, Gloria rose and stood waiting for him with Natalie's hand in hers.

"I'm not going to try to say 'thank you,'" she said, holding out her hand without waiting for Molly's introduction, "but I want you to know that I'm feeling very rich to-day." As she spoke, she laid her hand upon the golden head beside her.

Tom took her hand in both of his. "And I'm afraid *we* are going to feel very poor after to-day," he replied. Then, bending to kiss Natalie, he said, "Did you have a good time, honey-girl?"

"Oh, yes," responded Natalie, "Amos let me feed the pigs, an' Sabina let me help her make a pie, an' she made a teeny-weeny one for me an' I had it for my breakfast. An' I had a ride on Nellie's back, an'—O dear,—I did so many things I can't 'member all of 'em. But some day I'm goin' there an' stay a whole week, 'cause Sabina —she 'most *cried* when Uncle Roddy came an' got me."

Gloria's eyes were troubled; she was beginning to realize what this experience had meant to Natalie. With a passionate gesture, she hugged the child close, laying her cheek against her sunny curls.

"You wouldn't go away and leave Mother again, would you, sweetheart?" she asked wistfully.

Natalie squirmed. It was plain to see the decision was a hard one. But she answered after a moment, "You could come, too. I know Sabina would let you, 'cause she's got a perfe'ly '*normous* bed. You have to climb into it with steps."

Then sliding down from her mother's lap, she scampered away with the children to have a look at the puppies. This gave the older ones an opportunity to tell Tom all that had occurred during his absence.

"Wasn't it a clever way of handling the affair?" asked Molly when her account of it was finished. "Why, in the few minutes she was with them, she showed them the consequences of

their act more plainly than I had been able to with all my talking. She won them absolutely."

"I was sure they would capitulate," said Tom.

"But can you ever forgive me for the dreadful things I said to you?" asked Gloria, laying her hand on Molly's knee. "I was so afraid you might not understand, and be offended, but I *had* to reach Phyllis, somehow, and every other way had failed."

Molly laughed and pressed Gloria's hand reassuringly. "You were wonderful, my dear," she said, "though I'll have to admit that just for a moment, it *did* give me something of a shock. But after the first surprise, I realized that you were only acting a part. And when I saw the results, I felt as if nothing else mattered. Why, Phyllis insisted on calling up Amos, herself, and telling him that Rodney would be right over to get Natalie."

"It's the most wonderful thing in the world," said Gloria speaking very earnestly, "that Natalie should have fallen into such a home as this. Why, she is like another child, so rosy and brown

and full of life. It was her first real taste of happiness."

She fell silent for a little, then went on more slowly, "Poor darling! I'm afraid I've been a very selfish mother—I've given her so little of my time. I've never looked at life through her eyes, nor wondered what *she* was getting out of it. And yet, don't think that I don't love her. I *adore* her! I think it would have killed me if I hadn't got her back. But, you know, I never realized how much she had been cheated of until I saw *this*." Her gesture was as wide as the horizon. "Now she has had this little glimpse of freedom, I really hate to take her back to that lonely, shut-in life."

Molly leaned forward eagerly, a question trembling on her lips. She was wondering, hoping, praying.

"Must you?" she asked breathlessly. "Why couldn't you let her stay with us this summer?"

Gloria made no immediate reply. She sat looking out across the shady lawn and the quiet countryside, to the purple hills that ringed them

round. And far beyond their peaceful, wooded slopes, she seemed to see the lights and turmoil of a great city. There were tall buildings there and streets like gray stone canyons, and throngs of people hurrying to and fro. And high up in one of the canyon walls, like a little captive princess in a fairy tale, a wistful child peered down, and longed for something it was beyond her power to give. Freedom—Companionship—when these two were in the scales, what could *she* throw into the other side to make the balance even?

Gloria drew a long breath, and there were tears in her eyes as she spoke. "Why," she said, "to take her back to the city now would be like putting a little wild bird into a cage and expecting it to be happy. If you could—if you *would* keep her for me for a few weeks—or maybe longer—I should be so relieved,—so very, very happy."

Molly's eyes were like twin stars. "Oh, I can hardly *wait* to tell the children," she cried, and her voice had the lilt of the lark.

"You see," said Gloria after a brief silence, as she unaffectedly wiped her eyes, "Uncle Ainslee is putting on a new play this fall and he has cast me for the leading part. I shall be so busy with rehearsals, and *how* can I ever trust servants again? If it weren't for disappointing Uncle, I'd throw the whole thing over and settle down to play the rôle of Mother. But this play—" she stopped and looked at Rodney questioningly, "why, isn't it *your* play?" she asked, "it's called 'His Princess'."

"Why, yes, that's mine," grinned Rodney trying to muster up an off-hand manner.

"How will you like me as 'Yvette'?" she challenged, gaily. "Uncle says the part was *made* for me."

Rodney flushed with pleasure. "He's right. The part *was* made for you," he said.

The afternoon was waning and dinner time was near when the two young people strolled away for a quiet chat in the rose garden, and Tom and Molly were left alone. He pulled her down into the swing beside him, and she laid

her head against his shoulder with a contented little sigh.

"Life's just like a fairy story, isn't it?" he said, smiling down at her happy face. "Everything comes out all right in the end."

"Yes," said Molly dreamily, "and the Prince marries his Princess, and they live happily ever after."

EPILOGUE

FIVE little figures were lined up along the road in front of the Brewster place; five little figures with bright, expectant, happy faces. Two weeks had passed since Rodney had been summoned to New York by telegram, and today he was coming back. In fact, he was due at any minute.

"I wonder if anything could have happened," said Hilda in a worried tone. "It's ever'n ever so long since Father started after him."

"P'raps the train was late," suggested Sally.

"Oh, the two-thirty-eight
Is never, never late,"

chanted Phyllis.

Molly joined them all rosy and breathless from her run down the long slope from the house.

"What, never?" she laughed in reply to Phyllis's couplet.

"Well, *hardly* ever," Phyllis retorted.

They strained their eyes down the road, each hoping to be first to catch a glimpse of their faithful old Packarderm; and presently Hilda declared that she saw it.

"Yes, that's it, sure enough," said Molly, shading her eyes with her hand.

"I sawed it first!" shrieked Bobby excitedly, hopping up and down.

"Hooray!" they shouted as the car drew near, "Hooray! Hooray! Hoo—," but the sound died in their throats and they all gazed, open-mouthed, not at Uncle Roddy, but at a head which was thrust inquisitively out through the rear window of the car. A large gray head it was, with a long nose and sharply-alert, up-standing, pointed ears.

"It's Rinty!" they yelled, almost beside themselves with joy. "It's Rinty—Rinty!"

Rodney hopped lightly out as the car came to a stop, and swept them all together into a warm

embrace. "No, not Rinty," he replied in answer to their excited clamor, "but the next thing to it; one of his own sons."

"Oh, Rod," expostulated Molly, "you shouldn't have been so extravagant. Why, he must have cost a fortune!"

"But he's not from me," protested Rodney, "he's from Gloria. I told her you wouldn't want her to do it, but it was no use. Her heart was set on buying him for the children."

Molly gave his arm an understanding squeeze.

"Come, now," said Rodney to the impatient children, "I'll let him out and put him through his tricks."

They flocked about the great dog eagerly, caressing him and calling him extravagantly loving names. He was their hearts' desire, the symbol of their highest aspirations.

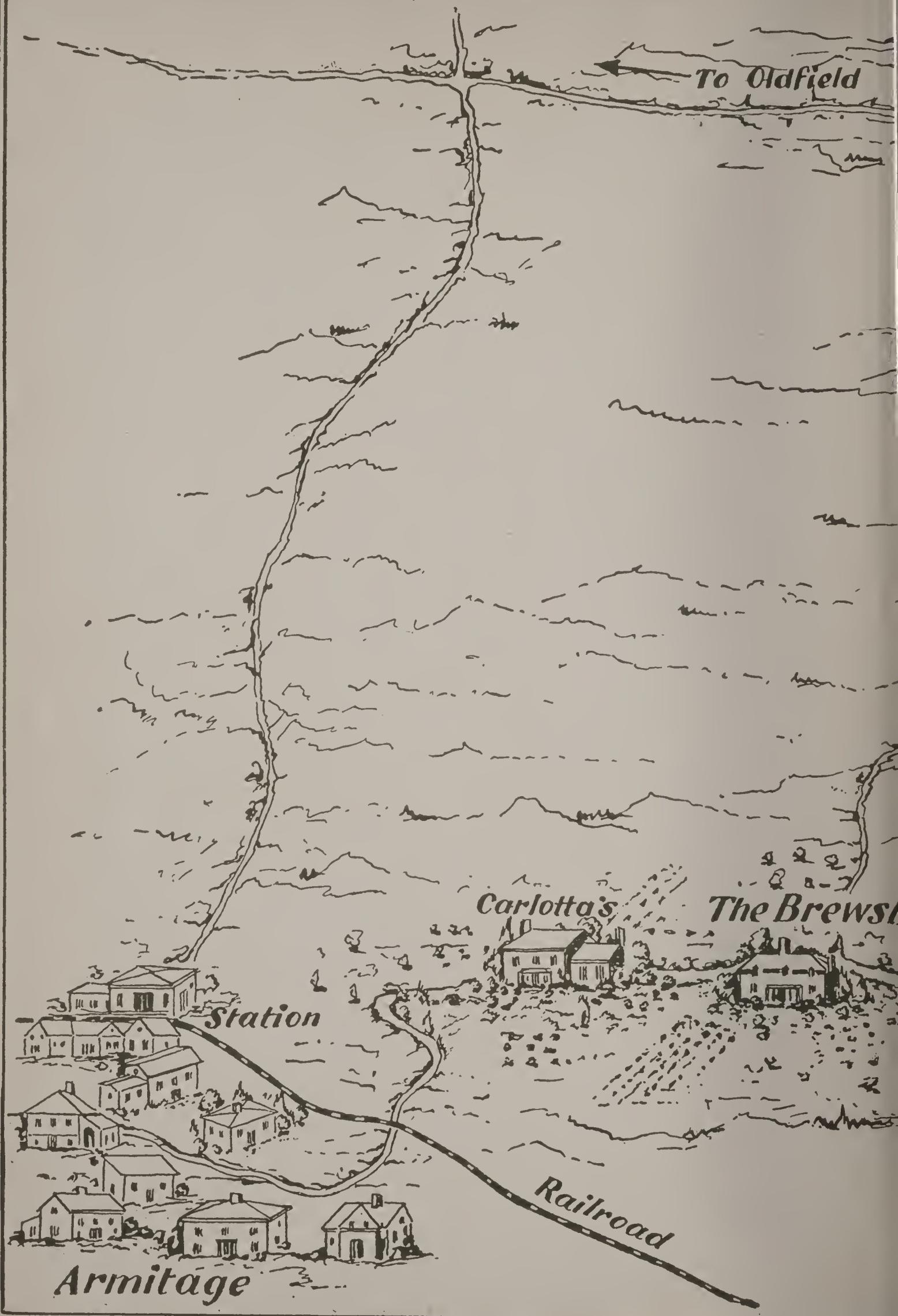
Bobby, a little timid of the splendid creature whose head was level with his own, hung back, clinging to his mother's hand. Tom joined them and, together, they stood watching the laughing, shouting flock.

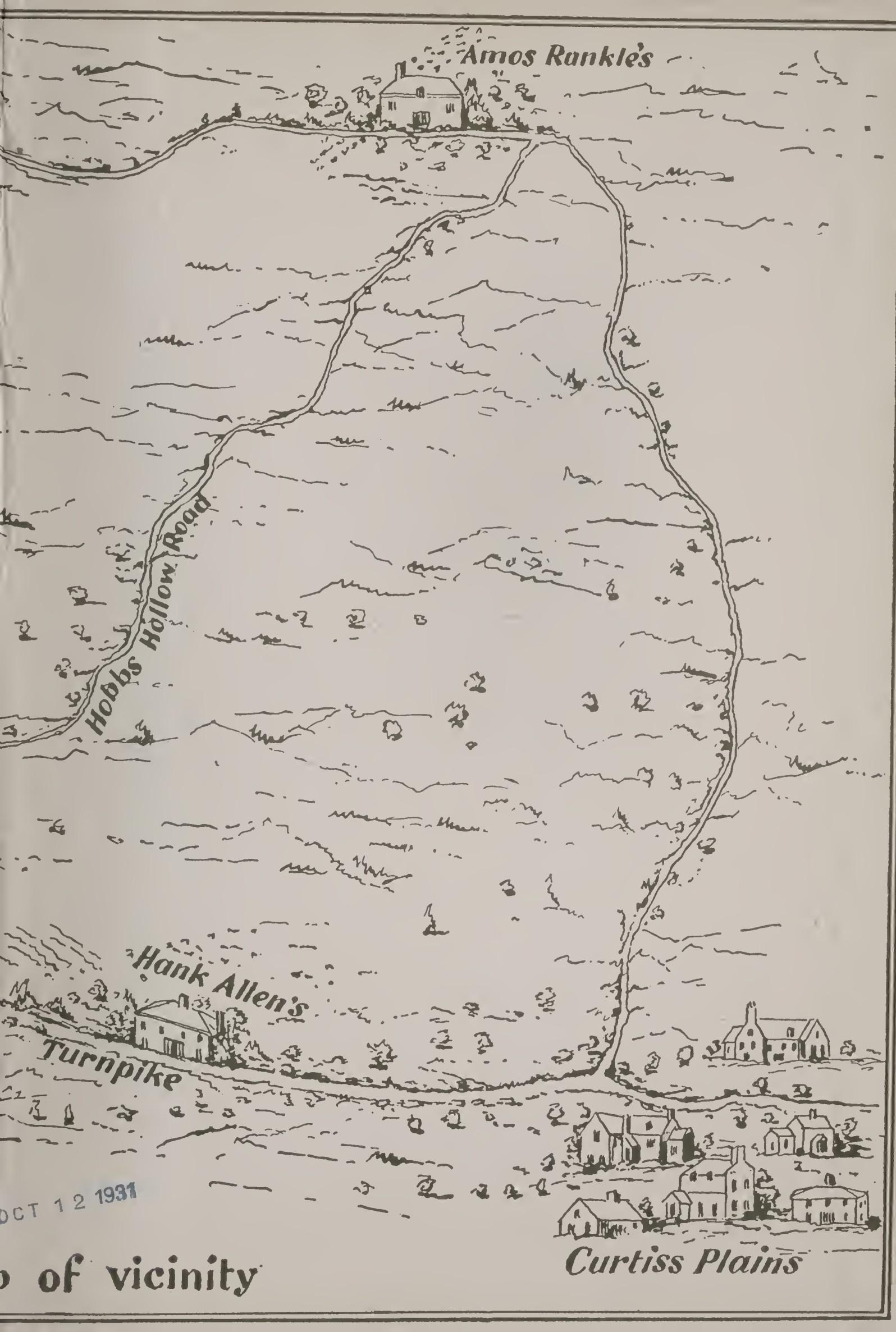
Molly's face was radiant. "I think their cup of happiness is full," she said.

"Yes," answered Tom, "it needed only this to make a perfect 'finis!'"

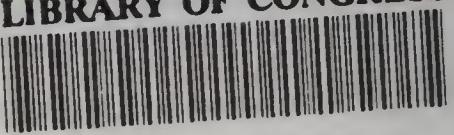
Bobby looked up with a puzzled face. "What's 'at, Favver?" he inquired.

Tom laughed as he swung the little fellow up to his broad shoulder. "Finis?" he repeated, "why that, Sonny-boy, is the end of the story."





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